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# Bf 109 Defence of the Reich Aces

John Weal



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Osprey's primary Luftwaffe author/artist, JOHN WEAL has written and/or illustrated more than 20 titles in the Aircraft of the Aces, Combat Aircraft and Aviation Elite Units series since 1994. Possessing one of the largest private collections of original German-language literature from World War 2, his research is firmly based on this huge archive. Fluent in German, Weal has also spent much time establishing contact with ex-members of the Luftwaffe, from General Staff Officers of the RLM to frontline aircrew. He has often used these private sources to gain access to further archival material, including complete Luftwaffe orders of battle for the various fighting fronts and individual combat reports. A freelance airbrush artist since the days of the monthly *RAF Flying Review*, and its various successors, Weal also helps his German wife run a small technical translation and interpreting agency. He is based in Berkshire, UK.



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# **Bf 109 Defence of the Reich Aces**





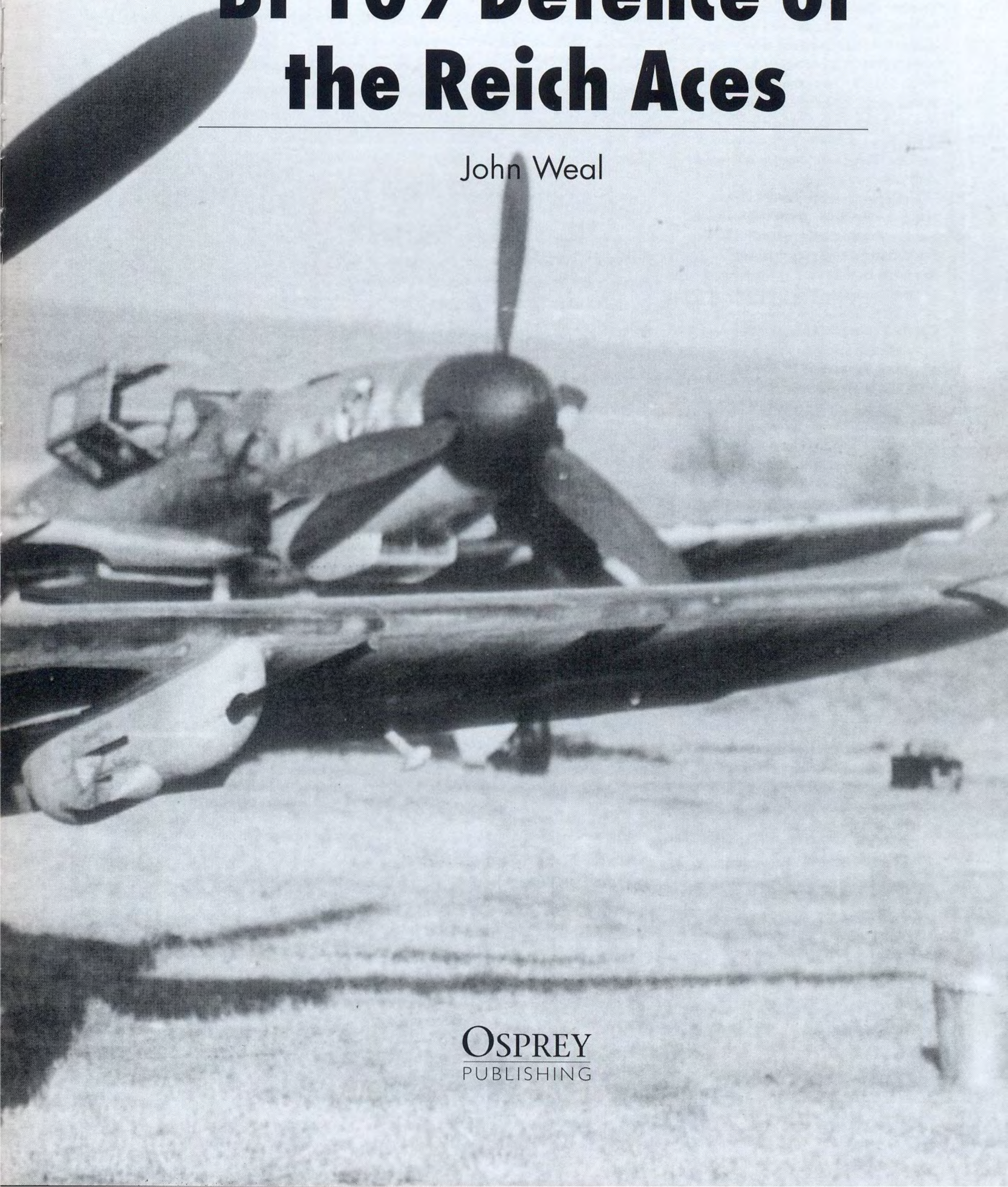


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# Bf 109 Defence of the Reich Aces

John Weal



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#### Front cover

On 17 August 1943, over 200 B-17 Flying Fortresses of the Eighth Air Force's 1st Bomb Wing were despatched to attack a vital target – the Reich's major ball-bearing factories at Schweinfurt. The bomber crews were expecting trouble. Their take-off had been delayed by bad weather, and they were a critical three hours or more behind the B-17s of the 4th Bomb Wing, which were heading for Regensburg. They knew the defending Luftwaffe fighters would be fully alerted and ready for them. And they were right.

At Eupen, a small Belgian town less than ten miles from the German border, the bombers 'short-legged' P-47 Thunderbolt escorts were forced to turn back. The Fortresses pressed on alone into Germany. It was the moment the Luftwaffe fighter pilots had been waiting for.

Among the first to attack were the 12 rocket-armed Bf 109G-6s of 5./JG 11 down from Jever. Oberleutnant Heinz Knoke's 'Black 1' was hit by heavy Browning 0.50-calibre machine gun fire as the *Staffel* jockeyed into position astern of the bombers. With his port wing damaged and left-hand rocket tube (nicknamed a 'stovepipe' by German fighter pilots) shot away, Knoke launched his remaining missile, but without result. Then the rest of the *Staffel* bored in.

According to Knoke's subsequent account of the action, both Feldwebel Erich Führmann, illustrated here in his 'Black 9', and Feldwebel Wilhelm Fest scored hits on B-17s which blew up in mid-air. However, post-war research suggests that the two 92nd Bomb Group (BG) Flying Fortresses hit in this engagement suffered only slight damage and later fell victim to conventional fighter attack.

Despite his damaged wing, Heinz Knoke took off again later to attack the bombers returning from Schweinfurt. He is credited with bringing down the 305th BG's flak-damaged B-17F 42-30159 *Settin' Bull*, which crashed in Belgium, before finally writing-off his own 'Black 1' in a forced landing near Rheinbach (Cover Artwork by Mark Postlethwaite)

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# CONTENTS

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## CHAPTER ONE

### **THE STAGE IS SET 6**

---

## CHAPTER TWO

### **STRUGGLES AND EARLY SUCCESSES 14**

---

## CHAPTER THREE

### **IN THE BALANCE 48**

---

## CHAPTER FOUR

### **THE TIDE TURNS 59**

---

## CHAPTER FIVE

### **THE LAST ACT 77**

---

### **APPENDICES 86**

COLOUR PLATES COMMENTARY 90

INDEX 96

---



# THE STAGE IS SET

**T**he start of the Luftwaffe's 820-day Defence of the Reich campaign coincided with one of the major turning points of the war. The opening shots were exchanged on 27 January 1943 when 53 American B-17 Flying Fortresses bombed the North Sea naval base of Wilhelmshaven. This was the first time that the Eighth Air Force had attacked a target within Germany itself. Six days later, and over 1500 miles to the east, the last emaciated survivors of *Generalfeldmarschall* von Paulus' 6. *Armee* – once a third of a million strong – surrendered to Soviet troops at Stalingrad. Never before had Hitler's forces suffered such a crushing defeat. And after this date never again would they win a major victory.

The aerial battle in defence of the Reich would thus be played out against a backdrop of the continual reverses and withdrawals taking place on all the other fighting fronts.

By the spring of 1945 German troops in the east, who had once stood at the very gates of Moscow and Stalingrad, would have been pushed back into the heart of their own capital, Berlin. In the Mediterranean, Axis forces in North Africa had long ago surrendered, setting in train the invasions of Sicily and Italy and the subsequent slow, stubborn retreat northwards into the shadow of the Austrian Alps. And in north-west Europe those defenders of Normandy who had managed to escape the killing fields around Falaise had been forced back to the Rhine and beyond, to the Elbe.

But for the Luftwaffe *Jagdgruppen* defending the daylight skies of the Greater German Reich there was nowhere to retreat to. They stood their ground and traded the US heavy bombers blow for blow. And the outcome, far from being a foregone conclusion, would hang in the balance for many months. It was to be almost a full year before the growing weight of American superiority – not least in the sleek cruciform shape of the P-51 Mustang escort

The gateway to the Reich. Both the RAF and USAAF chose Wilhelmshaven as their first target on mainland Germany. This is the later raid of 11 June 1943, and smoke pots are already beginning to form a screen below the approaching Flying Fortresses





fighter – began to tell irrevocably against them. But even then another year and more of desperately fought actions was to pass before they too were finally and conclusively beaten.

On 25 April 1945 a combined total of 1414 USAAF and RAF heavy bombers flew their last bombing raids of the European war. Not one of the 15 'heavies' lost in these operations fell to the guns of a defending Luftwaffe fighter. By this time the *Jagdwaaffe* was a totally spent force. And five days later – as proof positive that all was indeed lost – Adolf Hitler committed suicide in his Berlin bunker.

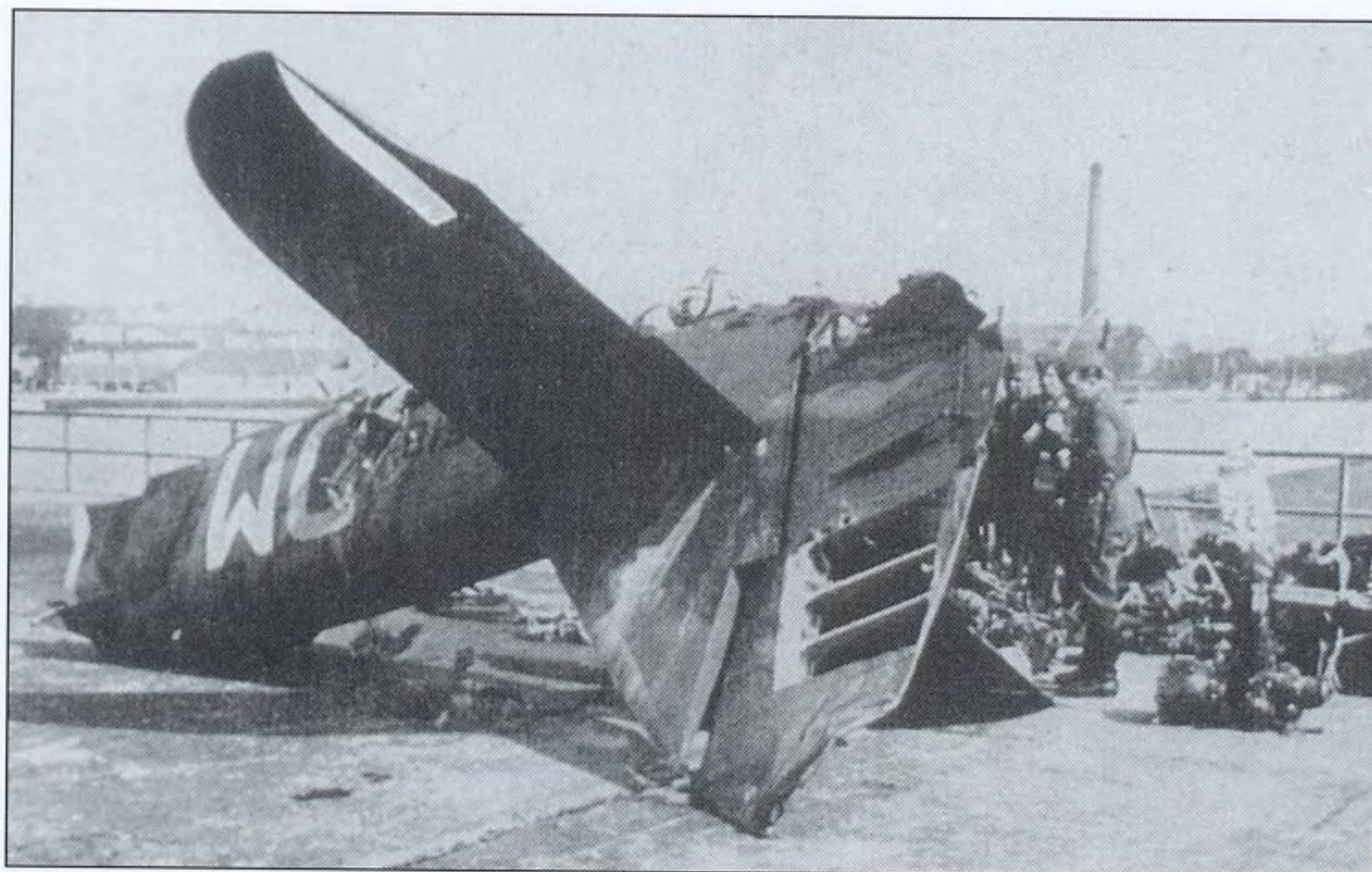
It had all been so very different in the beginning. Within hours of Great Britain's declaring war on Germany on 3 September 1939, Hampdens and Wellingtons of RAF Bomber Command were scouring the German Bight for enemy naval vessels. Although no sightings were made on this first day of hostilities, some 29 bombers were despatched against Wilhelmshaven and Brunsbüttel 24 hours later. Seven failed to return, three having been brought down by the Nordholz-based Bf 109Es of II./JG 77.

For the RAF – firm believers in the pre-war dictum that 'the bomber will always get through' (and presumably back again?) – the loss of nearly a quarter of its attacking force gave serious pause for thought. More than three weeks were to pass before the next attempt was made. On 29 September 11 Hampdens set out to search for German naval units reported to be at sea in the area of Heligoland. This time almost half the attackers were wiped out when Bf 109Ds of I./ZG 26 (a *Zerstörergruppe* awaiting delivery of its first Bf 110s) intercepted a formation of five Hampdens south of Heligoland and shot down every one of them.

There followed another lull while the RAF chiefs considered their options. They cited a whole number of reasons for the recent heavy losses – the accuracy of the German Navy's anti-aircraft fire, the often atrocious weather conditions, the attackers' lack of numbers – they even went so far as to suggest that some pilots were 'straggling' rather than keeping in close formation. The one possibility that they seemed reluctant to consider, let alone acknowledge, was that their bombers were being blown out of the sky by enemy fighters.

Nevertheless, all nine of the armed bomber sweeps carried out over the course of the next eight weeks had orders not to approach too close to the German mainland, but to remain on the outer periphery of the Bight. These operations, flown over open water along a wide arc between the Frisian islands of Borkum in the west to Sylt in the north, were completely uneventful. Not a single German warship was spotted, no bombs were dropped and not one aircraft was lost to enemy action.

It appeared that the RAF had decided to restrict its North Sea activities to the same level of routine patrolling as that being carried out along the



The wreckage of one of the four No 107 Sqn Blenheim IVs lost in the RAF's first bombing raids of the war is recovered from the bottom of Wilhelmshaven harbour. N6184 was brought down by flak from the German heavy cruiser *Admiral Hipper*





Oberstleutnant Carl Schumacher was tasked with organising the aerial defences of the German Bight

5./JG 77's Leutnant Winfried Schmidt is carried shoulder-high from his 'Red 1' after claiming one of the fourteen Wellingtons credited to II./JG 77 in the 'Battle of the German Bight' of 18 December 1939



Franco-German border which had already given rise to the phrase 'Phoney War'. But this was far from the case. The War Cabinet in London was eager to see the sinking of one of the enemy's capital ships – for morale purposes alone, if nothing else – and plans were already in hand for Bomber Command to return to the German coast in force.

Meanwhile, the Luftwaffe had not been idle. Upon the outbreak of war fighter strength in the whole of north-west Germany had com-

prised fewer than a dozen *Staffeln*, the majority equipped with obsolescent Bf 109Ds. These units came under the direct control of *Luftgaukommando XI* headquartered in Hannover. But the aggressive stance adopted by the RAF right from the outset soon led to changes.

Early in November 1939 Oberstleutnant Carl Schumacher, *Gruppenkommandeur* of II./JG 77, was tasked with setting up a completely new *Jagdgeschwaderstab* (Fighter Group HQ). Based at Jever, Schumacher's *Stab* JG 1 was unusual in that, at first, it did not possess any component *Gruppen* of its own. Instead, Schumacher was given control of all fighter units stationed along the North Sea coastal belt.

By mid-December this composite force had reached formidable proportions. It comprised two *Jagdgruppen* of Bf 109Es, a third flying a mix of Ds and Es, a semi-autonomous *Staffel* of Bf 109Ds, plus a *Zerstörergruppe* equipped with long-range Bf 110Cs. And it was this heterogeneous collection, composed mainly of the most modern fighters in the Luftwaffe's armoury – and backed up by a fledgling early-warning radar system – that was ready and waiting when Bomber Command next approached the German coastline.

The attacking force on 14 December was as mixed a bunch as the defenders. The 42 RAF bombers despatched – 23 Hampdens, 12

Wellingtons and 7 Whitleys – constituted the biggest Bomber Command effort of the war so far. But their extra numbers availed them little. Neither the Hampdens nor the Whitleys sighted the enemy. The Wellingtons did find a coastal convoy in the Schillig Roads, north of Wilhelmshaven, only to lose five of their number – all to the Bf 109Es of II./JG 77. A sixth was so badly damaged that it crashed when attempting to land back at base.

Four days later an all-Wellington force was sent out to search for shipping in the same sea area off Wilhelmshaven. Of the 22 bombers





that reached the target area, 12 were shot down by Schumacher's pilots (for a more detailed account of the 18 December 'Battle of the German Bight' see *Osprey Aircraft of the Aces 11* and 25).

The RAF could no longer ignore the evidence. The Wellington was the best bomber it possessed. Yet of the 36 machines of this type that had been despatched on the two sweeps of 14 and 18 December, exactly half had been destroyed by enemy fighter action – and this without their even venturing inland over German territory! The concept of the mutually supporting, self-defending daylight bomber formation had, quite literally, been shot to pieces.

The result was a fundamental change in RAF policy. Henceforth, with but a few notable exceptions, Bomber Command would restrict its strategic offensive against Germany to the hours of darkness. It seemed as if the Luftwaffe had won the daylight Defence of the Reich battle almost before it had begun. It is certainly no exaggeration to say that, for the next three years, Germany's North Sea coastal belt remained very much a backwater as the air war expanded ever further afield.

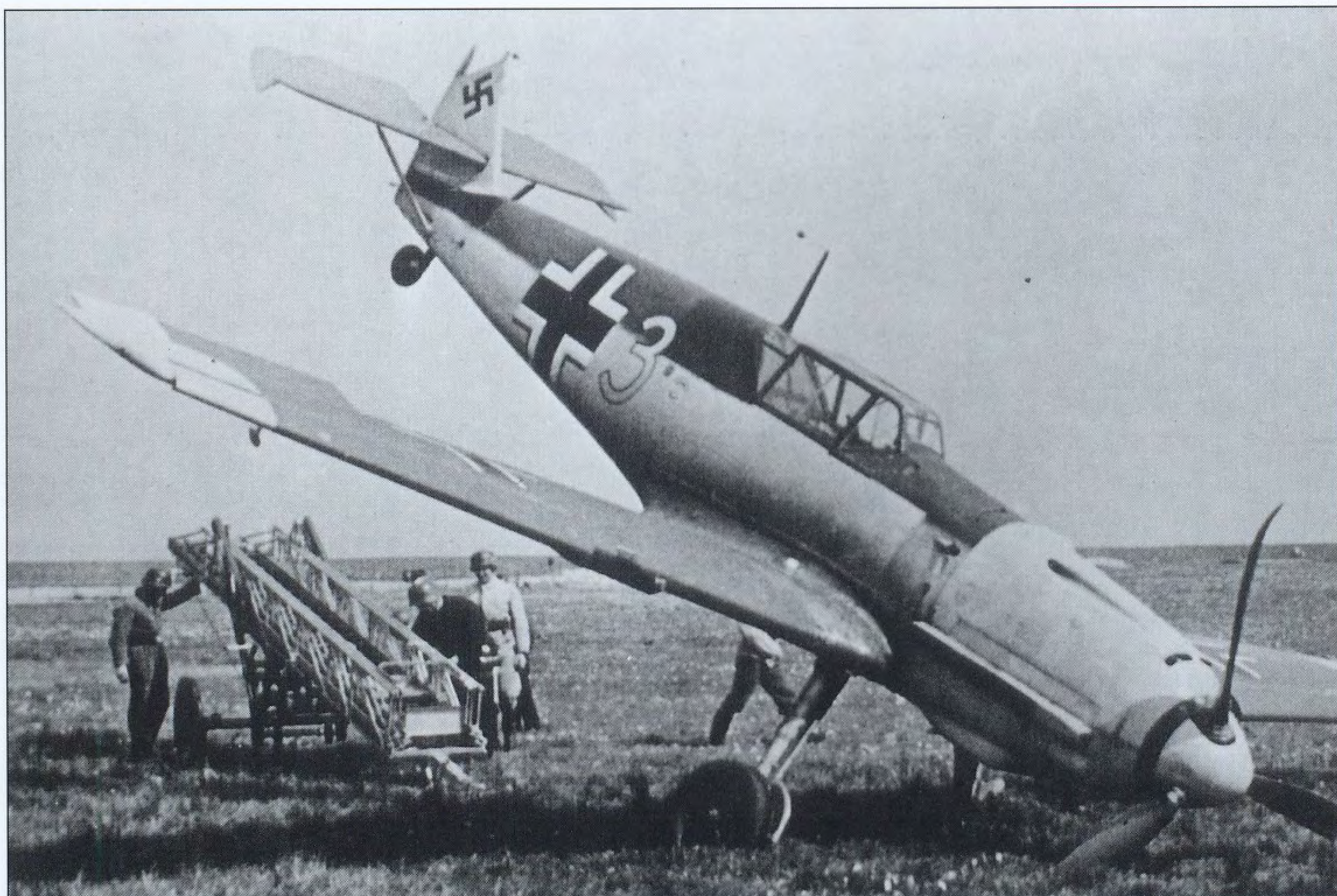
During the spring and summer of 1940 the focus of air operations shifted westwards, first with the invasion of the Low Countries and France and then the Battle of Britain. By year's end Luftwaffe units were also being sent south to the Mediterranean and Balkan regions. During this period, and well into 1941, Carl Schumacher's *Stab JG 1* continued to guard the Reich's northern seaboard using a miscellany of temporarily-attached *Jagdgruppen* and *Staffeln*, many of which were either on their way to – or resting from – deployment on other fronts.

Since the occupation of the Netherlands Schumacher's area of responsibility had been extended to include the Dutch coastal regions. Throughout 1941 and 1942, it was this western half of JG 1's defensive domain that was to see almost all of the action as the RAF's medium bombers stepped up their campaign against offshore shipping and selected land targets in the Low Countries.

It was also at this time that the first moves were made to establish Oberstleutnant Schumacher's motley command on a more permanent basis. Two previously semi-autonomous *Jagdstaffeln* stationed in the area

**In fact, 'only' 12 Wellingtons were lost on 18 December. No 9 Sqn's N2971/WS-B was lucky not to have been among them. Flg Off W J MacRae was awarded an immediate DFC for getting his bomber back to North Coates with two wounded aboard and despite extensive damage to both wings and the rear fuselage**





had already been redesignated as 1. and 2./JG 1. A third *Staffel* (3./JG 1) was activated from scratch in the early spring of 1941. The three *Staffeln* remained on their widely separated bases for several months, however, and it was not until September 1941 that they began operating together as a *Gruppe* under their recently-appointed *Kommandeur*, Major Dr Erich Mix. This new I./JG 1 should not be confused with the original I./JG 1 of the early months of the war, which had been redesignated III./JG 27 in July 1940 (see *Osprey Aviation Elite Units* 12).

Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union in June 1941 had resulted in the bulk of the Luftwaffe being transferred to the eastern front. The only fighter units remaining in northwest Europe were JGs 2 and 26, who were responsible for the defence of the French and Belgian coastal regions, and JG 1, whose area of operations now stretched from the Netherlands, along Germany's North Sea coastline and up into Denmark and southern Norway.

It was the pilots of JGs 2 and 26 who bore the brunt of the RAF's 1941 'lean into Europe'. The majority of the enemy's missions during this period were the so-called 'Circuses' – small formations of medium bombers, heavily escorted by fighters, whose primary object was to draw the Luftwaffe's fighters up into combat – and these simply did not possess the range to penetrate Reich airspace.

'Operation 77' was different, however. Mounted on 12 August 1941, and purportedly part of a drive to relieve the pressure on the west's newly-acquired Soviet ally (in retrospect, something of a forlorn hope!), 'Operation 77' was an all-Blenheim daylight raid despatched against two power stations located on the outskirts of Cologne. It was not an unqualified success. Of the 54 attackers, ten failed to return, and neither

Nosed over in the soft turf of De Kooy airfield near Den Helder, in the Netherlands, early in 1941, 3./JG 1's 'Yellow 3' adopts the classic pose commonly known in the Luftwaffe as a *Fliegerdenkmal*, or 'airman's monument'



target suffered long-lasting damage. Although the Blenheims' course took them across southern Holland, most of those brought down by Luftwaffe fighters fell victim to JG 26.

Several Bf 109Es of 2./JG 1 had been scrambled from Katwijk, on the Dutch coast, shortly before midday, but they had failed to intercept the incoming bombers. A second scramble some 60 minutes later had more success. This time the Bf 109 pilots sighted 'a group of six Blenheims running for the coast'. 2./JG 1's Unteroffizier Siegfried Zick got on the tail of one of the fleeing bombers and shot it down over Zouteland. It was a first, not only for future Defence of the Reich *Experte* Zick, but also for 2. *Staffel*.

Nearly a month was to pass before 2. *Staffel* claimed a second victory. But the Blenheim credited to Feldwebel Albert 'Ali' Griener on 5 September was something of a rarity. Coming down near the island of Borkum, it was the only one of I./JG 1's two dozen confirmed kills of 1941 to be caught *inside* German airspace. The following week I./JG 1's Dutch-based *Staffeln* was ordered to Jever. For the first time they would be operating together as a *Gruppe*. But the move to Jever had taken them further away from the scene of action, and the next three months remained almost entirely uneventful. The only break in the monotony, and the only victory gained in the last quarter of 1941, was an 'intruder' Hampden of No 106 Sqn shot down by I./JG 1's Oberfeldwebel Werner Gerhardt on 21 December – again over Holland.

Exactly a fortnight before Hampden AE151 crashed at Schoonebek, however, an event on the other side of the world had ensured that in the space of little more than a year, I./JG 1's North Sea patrol area would be transformed from an operational backwater into the frontline of the Reich's aerial defences.

The Japanese attack on the US Navy's Pacific Fleet in Pearl Harbor on the morning of 7 December 1941 opened up the war on a truly global scale. The United States and Great Britain officially declared war on Japan 24 hours later. And at 1500 hrs on 11 December Hitler announced to the members of the Reichstag that Germany was standing by her Tripartite Axis Asian ally by declaring war on America.

Despite the wave of public outrage that swept across the United States in the wake of the Japanese attack, President Roosevelt was persuaded that the first priority should be the defeat of Nazi Germany and the liberation of Europe. And one of the earliest moves towards this end was to be the establishment of an American strategic bomber force in the United Kingdom. On 20 February 1942 Brig Gen Ira C Eaker and six other USAAF officers arrived in England to set up the first American bomber command.

Eaker resisted pressure from British Prime Minister Winston Churchill to have his embryonic VIII Bomber Command join the RAF in its 'mass' night bombing raids. The Americans had implicit faith in the ability of their heavily-armed four-engined bombers, the B-17 Flying Fortress and B-24 Liberator, not merely to survive by day in the hostile skies of Europe, but to attack specific targets with pin-point precision.

The US Air War Plans Division drew up a list of 177 selected military and industrial targets, grouped within seven categories, whose destruction, it was confidently predicted, would deny Germany the



means to wage war. The first category was 'German Aircraft Plants'. The Americans' primary objective would be to destroy the Luftwaffe, both in the air and on the ground, as a prerequisite to the planned invasion of Europe. It was a task similar to that attempted by Göring's Luftwaffe in the Battle of Britain in the summer of 1940. The Luftwaffe had failed to knock out the RAF – but only by the narrowest of margins. Would the USAAF be more successful over mainland Europe?

It was not a programme that could be embarked upon overnight. To start with, the strength of Eaker's command would have to be built up, and then operational experience gained. The first heavy bomber mission flown by VIII Bomber Command took place on 17 August 1942 when a dozen B-17Es (one carrying Brig Gen Ira Eaker himself) bombed the Rouen-Sotteville marshalling yards in France from an altitude of 23,000 ft (7000 m). All 12 Fortresses returned to their Northamptonshire base, two having sustained superficial flak damage over the target area. For the remainder of the year VIII Bomber Command's 'heavies' continued to hone their operational skills on the 'nursery slopes' of occupied northwest Europe. It would cost them over 30 of their number, mostly to Luftwaffe fighters and flak. But it prepared crews for the ordeal that lay ahead.

On the other side of the North Sea things remained fairly quiet during 1942. There had, however, been some significant organisational changes early in the year. On 5 January Oberstleutnant Carl Schumacher relinquished command of JG 1 to take up the appointment of *Jafü Norwegen* (Fighter-Leader Norway). It therefore fell to his successor, Major Erich von Selle, to oversee JG 1's transition from little more than a caretaker *Stab* into a full four-*Gruppe Geschwader*.

Hauptmann Hans von Hahn's Bf 109F-equipped I./JG 3 had been withdrawn from the eastern front in September 1941 for rest and refit in the Reich. Two months later it was transferred to two airfields on the Dutch coast – Katwijk and Vlissingen (Flushing). On 15 January 1942 the *Gruppe* was redesignated to become II./JG 1.

The origins of von Selle's last two *Gruppen* were less straightforward. By this stage of the hostilities almost every Luftwaffe *Jagdgeschwader* had formed its own rear-area *Ergänzungsgruppe*. Perhaps best described as 'in-unit OTUs', the task of these *Gruppen* was to prepare newly-trained fighter pilots for frontline service with their parent *Geschwader*. In turn, each such *Gruppe* had set up its own *Einsatzstaffel* (operational squadron), composed of instructors and selected trainees, which could be called upon to fly combat missions as and when the need arose. And it was from the *Ergänzungsgruppen* and *Einsatzstaffeln* of JGs 2, 26, 27, 51, 52 and 53 that III. and IV./JG 1 were created.

JG 1 was somewhat unusual in being one of only two *Jagdgeschwader* currently made up of four component *Gruppen* (the other

A much more serious incident than the one illustrated on page ten resulted in the death of Unteroffizier Erwin Grütz of IV./JG 1 on 4 July 1942 when his Bf 109F-4, 'White 6', crashed into a building during an emergency scramble from Bergen-op-Zoom, in Holland. The fighters were responding to an incoming raid on the airfield by RAF Bostons





being JG 51 on the eastern front). The reason for JG 1's additional strength was no doubt the length of North Sea coastline it was assigned to protect. The *Geschwader's* area of operations now stretched in an unbroken arc from the Netherlands up into southern Norway.

In mid-1942 Major von Selle's three new *Gruppen* began converting from their Bf 109s on to Fw 190As. Only the original I./JG 1 remained on Messerschmitts, gradually exchanging its earlier E and F models for pressurised, high-altitude G-1s.



Hauptmann Fritz Losigkeit, *Kommandeur* of IV./JG 1, was photographed here soon after his *Gruppe* had completed its conversion from the Bf 109 to the Fw 190 in September 1942

Operationally, 1942 was very much a continuation of 1941. The bulk of the 90+ victories credited to JG 1 during the course of the year were scored over the Low Countries, where the RAF mediums were intensifying their attacks on targets in the coastal provinces and along the inshore shipping lanes. I./JG 1 claimed six victims over this westernmost sector – one, for example, being the Hudson shot down off the Dutch island of Texel on 17 February by Oberfeldwebel Gerhardt, the *Gruppe's* leading scorer. This took his total to nine.

But it was the 11 RAF machines brought down by I./JG 1 during the latter half of the year *inside* German airspace that was the true indication of how the daylight air war was edging inexorably closer to the Reich's northern borders. The majority of these claims were for solo reconnaissance intruders, including three high-flying Mosquitos. Based at Jever, at the very centre of the *Geschwader's* defensive arc, and equipped with brand new pressurised *Gustavs*, the *Gruppe* was ideally positioned and equipped to deal with such incursions.

Although they themselves had not yet been confronted by a formation of US heavy bombers, the pilots of I./JG 1, commanded since September 1942 by Hauptmann Günther Beise, had studied the intelligence summaries and read the combat reports of their fellow pilots of JGs 2 and 26 who had already seen action against the American 'heavies' over France and the Low Countries. These had gone a long way towards dispelling the mystique that had previously surrounded the US 'wonder' bombers. The B-17s and B-24s were far from invulnerable to determined fighter attack, as their casualties over northwest Europe proved.

The US bomber crews were well aware that they would soon be sent to attack a target inside Germany. Beise's pilots knew with equal certainty that they would be coming. For both sides it was just a matter of time.

And that time arrived on 27 January 1943.



A well-known, but nonetheless intriguing, shot of a Bf 109E of I./JG 1. 'Black 13' sports the *Gruppe* badge below the cockpit and carries a 250-kg bomb on a ventral rack. The purpose of the former is clear, but the reason for the latter less so. As far as is known, the unit was never engaged on *Jabo* ops. Could obsolescent *Emils* such as this, one or two of which remained on strength until the winter of 1942-43, have been employed in early aerial-bombing trials?



# STRUGGLES AND EARLY SUCCESSES

**T**he target chosen for the USAAF's first daylight raid on Germany was the same as that selected by the RAF over three years earlier – the naval base of Wilhelmshaven on the North Sea coast.

VIII Bomber Command's Mission No 31 on 27 January 1943 called for a maximum effort from all six of its bomb groups. A mixed force of 64 B-17s and 27 B-24s was despatched, but a combination of bad weather and poor navigation resulted in the Liberators failing to find the target. While searching, they ran foul of Fw 190s of II. and IV./JG 1 off the Dutch coast and two B-24s were shot down.

Meanwhile, 53 of the Flying Fortresses had made it through to Wilhelmshaven. Nine miles away at nearby Jever, Hauptmann Beise's I./JG 1 had been the first *Gruppe* to receive the order to scramble. Clawing for height in their pressurised *Gustavs*, they made contact with the bombers in broken cloud at an altitude of some 25,000 ft. But in the action that followed, their inexperience showed. At subsequent debriefings many bomber crewmen made particular reference to the heavy, but largely ineffective, flak which had tracked them in over the Frisian islands and stayed with them during their run across the mainland. The Luftwaffe's fighters, however, 'hadn't pressed home their attacks like those guys stationed in France usually did'.

Despite this less than glowing endorsement from the enemy, five of Beise's pilots claimed to have brought down a Flying Fortress. In reality, although well over half of the B-17s that bombed Wilhelmshaven suffered minor combat damage, only one failed to return. The dubious distinction of being the first American casualties of the Defence of the Reich campaign fell to Capt Vance Beckham and his crew of the 305th BG B-17F 41-24637.

Exactly who shot Beckham down is more open to question. One of the five claims was later downgraded to an unconfirmed. As to the other four, at least one reference source suggests that the victor was 2. *Staffel*'s Feldwebel Siegfried Zick. If this is indeed the case, it was Zick's second kill (his first had been the Blenheim downed during the RAF's daylight raid on the Cologne power stations back in August 1941). He would add a further 17 'heavies' to his score during subsequent service with III./JG 11, the

Oberleutnant Hugo Frey of 2./JG 1 was one of the four claimants for the first B-17 downed over Wilhelmshaven on 27 January 1943. He is pictured here (bareheaded, second from right) as *Kapitän* of 7./JG 11 a year later. He would be shot down and killed in his Fw 190 during the first major USAAF raid on Berlin on 6 March 1944





last seven of them after converting to the Fw 190. His overall total stood at 32 when he was seriously wounded on the western front in the summer of 1944.

On the other side of the coin, the action of 27 January 1943 also resulted in the first Luftwaffe losses in the daylight Defence of the Reich. Five of I./JG 1's *Gustavs* went down, with three of the fighters taking their pilots into the depths of the North Sea with them.

Despite the jubilation back at VIII Bomber Command HQ that only three of the original 91 bombers despatched had failed to return, and notwithstanding the fact that 24 hours later the German armed forces communiqué triumphantly announced the destruction of *nine* bombers, neither side could have been entirely happy with the results of the Wilhelmshaven mission. Little more than half the attacking force had managed to locate the assigned target, and the damage they inflicted was slight. For the defenders, their performance had fallen far short of the 50 per cent casualty rate inflicted upon the RAF Wellingtons that had raided Wilhelmshaven three years earlier. The loss of three bombers was not going to persuade the USAAF to abandon its daylight offensive against the Reich and join the RAF under cover of darkness. The B-17s and B-24s would be back.

As a final postscript to 27 January, mention should also be made of the overclaiming by both sides. While the Luftwaffe pilots submitted claims for nine bombers destroyed, the gunners manning the US 'heavies' filed for no fewer than 22 enemy fighters shot down, plus 14 probables and a further 13 damaged. JG 1's combat losses in fact totalled just six. Registering on the mind in the heat of battle, and subsequently made in all good faith, such inflated claims are perhaps understandable – particularly in the case of the air gunners, where there could be six or more crew members aboard every bomber in each formation blazing away at the same hapless fighter as it barrelled past them.

Exaggerated claiming was to be a permanent feature of the Defence of the Reich campaign. And the figures would become even more distorted as the total of aircraft involved on each side grew to ten times or more the numbers participating in the early raids.

On 2 February 1943 Brig General Eaker sent his crews out on another maximum effort. But the atrocious weather conditions over the North Sea proved a greater deterrent than the Luftwaffe's fighters and all six groups were forced to turn back. Two days later they made a second attempt to get through to the same objective – the Hamm marshalling yards near Dortmund, in the Ruhr. The weather had scarcely improved in the interim, however, and the two Liberator groups were forced to abort due to severe icing.

Abandoning any hopes of reaching Hamm, over half the B-17 force diverted to the North Sea port of Emden as a last resort. They were

First published in a wartime Dutch newspaper, this photograph shows one of the five B-17Fs lost in the Emden raid of 4 February 1943. Damaged by flak and then attacked by Bf 109s and Bf 110s, the 91st BG's 41-24589 *Texas Bronco* crash-landed on the sands of the Dutch Frisian island of Terschelling





intercepted not only by elements of the same three *Gruppen* of JG 1 that had engaged them over Wilhelmshaven, but also by a number of Bf 110s of NJG 1. Thrown in as a stop-gap measure to bolster defensive numbers, it was the first time that twin-engined nightfighters had been sent up against the USAAF by day.

Although all three *Staffeln* of I./JG 1 were scrambled, only 3./JG 1 found a formation of B-17s in the thick cloud. Unteroffizier Otto Werner was credited with the destruction of one of the Fortresses southeast of Emden. The Fw 190 *Gruppen* claimed a further six, against two combat fatalities of their own. Dominated by the weather, it had been another inconclusive and unsatisfactory encounter for both sides.

The weather continued to restrict operational activity for the next three weeks. During that time VIII Bomber Command made another abortive attempt to attack the Hamm yards, but did manage to mount two missions against coastal targets in France. Then, on 26 February, it was back to Germany.

The briefed target for Mission No 37 was Bremen, but the weather again put paid to the VIII's carefully-laid plans. Thick cloud obscured the objective and all six bomber groups turned instead to a target of opportunity – the U-boat yards at Wilhelmshaven. This time the Fw 190 *Gruppen* were ordered off first, but they were able to down only one of the incoming bombers over open water. I./JG 1's *Gustavs* caught the 'heavies' as they were crossing the coast, and in less than 20 minutes claimed eight – four Liberators and four Flying Fortresses – without loss to themselves.

The first Liberator fell to a determined onslaught by 2. *Staffel*'s Leutnant Heinz Knoke. His initial frontal attack had resulted in just a few hits on the B-24's right wing, and so;

'I went in for a second pass, again head on, but this time from a little below. I kept on firing until I had to break away to avoid colliding with the bomber. As I did so, I saw flames spreading along the bottom of its fuselage. It sheered away from the formation in a wide turn to the right. I followed it down, attacking twice more, this time from above and behind the tail. Ignoring the return fire from the Liberator's gunners, I watched my cannon shells rake along the top of its fuselage and right wing.

'The fire spread out along right wing. The inboard propeller windmilled to a stop. And then, suddenly, the whole wing broke off. The Liberator went spinning down almost vertically, a long black trail of smoke marking its descent. At an altitude of 900 metres there was a tremendous explosion. The bomber had disintegrated. The blazing wreckage landed just outside the perimeter of Bad Zwischenahn airfield.'

Although the Liberator was Heinz Knoke's third confirmed victory, it was his first heavy bomber. It was also the first B-24 to be lost over the Reich. By a cruel twist of fate, there had been 11 men aboard the bomber. For many weeks past a group of US newspaper correspondents had been requesting permission to fly on a bombing mission. The Eighth Air Force had finally given the go-ahead on 26 February. Five of the correspondents elected to ride with the Flying Fortresses. The sixth, Robert B Post of the *New York Times*, chose to accompany Capt Howard F Adams and his crew aboard their 44th BG B-24D 41-23777 *Maisey*. There were two survivors from *Maisey*'s final mission to Wilhelmshaven. Neither of them was Post.



Only two Liberators were lost on the 26 February raid, not the four claimed by I./JG 1. The second was *Maisey's* sister-ship, *Sad Sack* (41-23804), sent down over Oldenburg by 3. *Staffel's* Unteroffizier Leo Demetz two minutes later. It is also highly unlikely that all four of the B-17s credited to the *Gruppe* on this date were, in fact, destroyed. VIII Bomber Command's admitted losses were five B-17s and two B-24s – less than half of the 15 claimed by the Luftwaffe fighters (13 shared between JG 1s four *Gruppen* and two by NJG 1's nightfighters, who had again been called upon to lend their support).



Coming initially from JG 52, Heinz Knoke served throughout almost all of the Defence of the Reich campaign, latterly as a *hauptmann* and *Gruppenkommandeur* of III./JG 1

Thus ended the first month of the Defence of the Reich campaign. The dominant feature throughout had been the appalling weather. This affected the US bomber crews more than the Luftwaffe's fighter pilots. Many of the former had still been training in the cloudless blue skies of the southern United States only months earlier. Some of the latter had been stationed on the North Sea coast for two years or more and were wise to the vagaries of the German Bight in all its moods, summer and winter.

It had certainly been the atrocious conditions which had restricted VIII Bomber Command's activities to just three raids, all against targets on the North Sea coastline. The 15 combat losses sustained during these missions had done nothing to dent American confidence in unescorted daylight bombing. Not that they were in a position to do anything about it if it had. The short-legged Spitfire VBs with which the embryonic VIII Fighter Command was currently equipped would have been able to do little more than wave the bombers goodbye and wish them *bon voyage* as they reached the limit of their range halfway across the North Sea.

For their part, although I./JG 1 had accounted for some half-dozen of the enemy's losses, *Hauptmann* Beise's pilots had already come to realise that their new Bf 109G-1s were proving far from ideal bomber-killing machines. The early *Gustav's* armament of a single engine-mounted 20 mm MG-151/20 cannon and two 7.9 mm MG 17 fuselage machine guns lacked the punch to despatch a heavy bomber cleanly – as demonstrated by the four passes required by future Knight's Cross winner Heinz Knoke to bring down his first B-24. Several attempts were made to improve the G-1's firepower.

One or two of the *Gruppe's* fighters were fitted with a pair of underwing gondolas containing MG 151/20 cannon. Others were later equipped with rocket launchers. A few even had bomb racks attached to their bellies so that trials could be carried out into the feasibility of dropping bombs onto the American heavy bomber formations from above! For the time being, however, it was business as usual for both sides. And the month of March would also see just three incursions into Reich airspace.

On 4 March VIII Bomber Command finally made it to the Hamm marshalling yards – or, rather, one bomb group did. It was to have been





A pair of unidentified I. *Gruppe* machines equipped with drop tanks and underwing cannon gondola patrol the skies of western Germany in the spring of 1943

an all-Flying Fortress strike, with the Liberators flying a diversionary mission on this date. But the four B-17 groups became separated in the omnipresent heavy cloud over the North Sea. Three decided to bomb Rotterdam as an alternative. The 91st BG plugged on alone on instruments until breaking out into clear weather over Germany.

I./JG 1's participation in the day's action was confined to 3. *Staffel*, which engaged the 'heavies' west of the target area and reported one *Gustav* damaged by return fire. But the sole claim for a B-17 destroyed, by Unteroffizier Günther Range, is not corroborated by US records.

A fortnight was to pass before enemy bombers were next reported to be approaching across the North Sea. Their target was the Vegesack U-boat yards on the River Weser, south of Bremen. All three *Staffeln* of I./JG 1 were scrambled, and they intercepted a formation of incoming B-24s south of Heligoland. In the 25-minute running battle that ensued between the island and the coast, three pilots of 2. *Staffel* claimed a Liberator apiece, although only one B-24 was subsequently reported missing. Two G-1s also went down. Despite being wounded, both pilots managed to take to their parachutes. One, Oberleutnant Hortari Schmude, the *Staffelkapitän* of I./JG 1, was picked up safely. The injuries suffered by the other, 2. *Staffel*'s Leutnant Dieter Gerhardt, were so severe that he died in his dinghy before help could reach him.

Forty minutes later, and some 75 miles off the Dutch coast, another Bf 109 pilot, Unteroffizier Max Winkler of 2./JG 27, was credited with shooting down one of a group of B-17s heading back to England.

The *Afrika* badge on the cowlings of this early *Gustav* 'gunboat' clearly shows it to be an aircraft of I./JG 27, then based at Leeuwarden, in March 1943





Since being withdrawn from North Africa in November 1942, I./JG 27 had been stationed in northern France (see *Osprey Aviation Elite Units 12*). On 15 March 1943 Oberleutnant Josef Jansen's 2. *Staffel* had then been transferred to Amsterdam-Schiphol on temporary attachment to JG 1. It was the first of many units that would be fed into the Defence of the Reich organisation as the daylight battle of the skies of Germany intensified. And Winkler's B-17 was just the first of nearly 200 US heavy bombers that I./JG 27 would claim in the course of that campaign.

VIII Bomber Command's Mission No 46 of 22 March was another maximum effort against a familiar target – Wilhelmshaven. The approaching bombers were first engaged by Fw 190s of JG 1 north of the Dutch Frisian Island of Texel. Then I. *Gruppe's Gustavs* received the order to scramble, only to be recalled when uncertainty arose as to the enemy's intended objective. While the Messerschmitts were being readied for a second take-off, Leutnant Heinz Knoke seized his opportunity.

Although he has since attributed the original idea of aerial bombing the US formations from above to his great friend Dieter Gerhardt – with whom he had been conducting test flights in the interim – the latter's recent death meant that it had fallen to Knoke himself to put the theory into practice. Hurriedly calling for his groundcrew to arm his machine with a 250-kg bomb, Knoke sat fuming and fidgeting in his cockpit as the armourers struggled to attach the bomb to the *Gustav's* belly rack. He watched his *Staffel* scramble and head for the coast. Then, finally:

"Ready!" Easing the throttle forward, I trundle heavily to the far side of the field. With the weight of the bomb beneath my fuselage, I have got to take off into the wind. But as I turn to do so my machine suddenly tips to the left – a tyre has burst! I send up a red flare. My groundcrew over at dispersal immediately grasp what has happened. Twenty or thirty men pile into a small truck and race across the field towards me. They put their backs under the left wing and heave it up. With the engine still running, the tyre is changed in a matter of seconds.

"All clear!" The men quickly jump out of the way. I push the throttle forward and start to pick up speed. The kite begins to sag to port again, but after a 200-metre run I manage to haul it off the ground, missing the roof of Number 2 hangar by a hair's breadth.

'I climb out over the sea at full throttle into a cloudless blue sky. High above me – at 23,000 ft – I can see the ruler-straight contrails of the *Amis* (Americans), as well as those of our own fighters curving in to attack. The battle is already in progress, the unaccustomed heavy load is making my crate damned sluggish. It takes me almost 25 minutes to stagger up to 29,500 ft. The *Amis* have already dropped their bombs on Wilhelmshaven as the fire and smoke far below clearly indicate. Now they are retreating out over Heligoland.

An armourer poses for the camera just prior to hoisting a 250-kg bomb onto the ventral rack of Leutnant Heinz Knoke's 'Black 1'. The overall lack of urgency suggests that this is in preparation for a practice mission, not the emergency scramble described in the text





'I creep forward above the formation until I am level with the lead B-17. I have been under fire from below for some minutes now as I try to take a rough aim, dipping first the left wing and then the right to keep the formation in sight. Two, three bullet holes blossom in my left wing.

'I fuse the bomb, take aim one last time and press the bomb-release button on the control stick. My bomb plummets downwards. Climbing steeply, I bank so that I can watch its fall. It explodes right in the middle of a group of three Boeings. A wing is torn off one of them, and the other two dive away in alarm. Some 19 miles west of Heligoland, my third heavy bomber plunges into the sea (Knoke was one of three claimants during the recent Vegesack raid). There has been no sign of fire. The torn-off wing follows it down, fluttering like an autumn leaf.'

Although JG 1 was credited with four B-17s on this date, only one actually went down. All the evidence points to the day's sole Fortress casualty – the 91st BG's B-17F 42-29659 *Liberty Bell* as having fallen victim to Knoke as described above. Some sources have suggested that Knoke's fighter was armed with rockets rather than a bomb, but this is at complete variance with the Luftwaffe pilot's own later accounts of the action, all of which maintain that the B-17 was downed by a single bomb.

Whatever impact the bomb may have had on the remaining 17 Fortresses in the 91st BG formation, its detonation reverberated up the Luftwaffe chain of command right to the very top.

Immediately after landing back at Jever, Leutnant Knoke was instructed to report to the *Geschwaderkommodore*. Oberstleutnant Dr Erich Mix had also been in the air at the time, and had witnessed the demise of the B-17;

'My word, Knoke, you ought to try that with the whole *Staffel*!'

'That's the plan, sir'.

'Do you think it will work?'

Knoke was cautious;

'If today wasn't just a fluke, we ought to be able to bring down a few more *dicke Autos* ('fat cars', i.e. heavy bombers) the same way.'

Next, the *Jafü Deutsche Bucht* (Fighter-Leader German Bight), Oberst Karl Hentschel, telephoned;

'I'm delighted, my dear Knoke, magnificent show, congratulations!'

Then, during the night, Knoke's bedside telephone rang. It was the duty switchboard operator;

"Herr Leutnant, I have a top-priority call for you from the OKL (Luftwaffe High Command)!'

"What! For me?" 'I state my name. A Major of the *Reichsmarschall's* staff is on the other end of the line. "It was you who brought down the enemy machine today by bombing, was it not?"

"Jawohl, Herr Major." I am asked to give full details – the type of bomb used, what kind of fuse, how had I carried out the attack, what were the results. Then, "Who ordered the bombing operation to be flown?" Ordered? "Nobody, Herr Major, I simply went up and dropped the bomb."

'There is a long silence. I realise for the first time that I had acted completely without authority. Nobody had ordered a bomb-carrying mission to be flown. I could smell trouble brewing. The Major came back on the line. "I am putting you through to the Herr *Reichsmarschall*!" His



Pictured here earlier as a hauptmann with II./JG 77, Major Anton Mader was appointed *Kommodore* of JG 11 upon the *Geschwader's* activation on 1 April 1943



words hit me like a bolt from the blue. Lying in bed, wearing only a pyjama jacket, I freeze to attention horizontally and bark out my name, rank and unit. "I am delighted by the initiative you displayed and wish to express to you my personal appreciation." "Most obedient thanks, Herr Reichsmarschall!" And that was that.'

Although Knoke was later chewed out for his unauthorised action by *General der Flieger* Josef Kammhuber, GOC XII. *Fliegerkorps*, Göring's personal interest in the matter ensured that the idea was taken further. The test centre at Rechlin was ordered to carry out trials to establish the proper tactics for air-to-air bombing, and several such missions were reportedly flown by *Jagdgruppen* based in the Mediterranean. Here, they proved a complete failure. Firstly, US bombers in the southern theatre did not fly such tight formations. Secondly, and much more importantly, they often enjoyed the luxury of fighter protection. Over the Reich, air-to-air bombing operations against VIII Bomber Command's unescorted 'heavies' would sputter on for a little longer before the concept was finally abandoned altogether.

Less spectacular, but of much greater benefit to the Defence of the Reich organisation in the long run, was the steady infusion of strength as further *Jagdgruppen* were added to its order of battle.

Major Reinhard 'Seppl' Seiler's III./JG 54 (see *Osprey Aviation Elite Units* 6) was a veteran Russian front Bf 109 unit which had been part of an experiment aimed at exchanging one complete eastern front *Jagdgeschwader* with a western-based one. The impracticalities of the scheme soon revealed themselves, however, and it was called off after just one reinforced *Gruppe* from each *Jagdgeschwader* had swapped places. But whereas I./JG 26 was promptly recalled from Russia, III./JG 54, whose members had arrived by rail at Vendeville, in France, on 12 February 1943, would remain in the west. After receiving a full complement of new Bf 109G-4s, III./JG 54 was transferred to Oldenburg, south of Wilhelmshaven, on 27 March 1943.

Four days later JG 1's four component *Gruppen* were split into two, with a new III. *Gruppe* to be added to each pair, thus effectively creating two *Jagdgeschwader* out of one. The redesignations of the three Fw 190 *Gruppen* are irrelevant here. Suffice it to say that, as of 1 April 1943, Hauptmann Beise's Jever-based I./JG 1 was renumbered to become II./JG 11.

The 'new' JG 11 now became responsible for the German sector of the North Sea coastline, while the reconstituted JG 1 guarded the more westerly Dutch seaboard approaches to the Reich. The two new III. *Gruppen* – both created from scratch and both initially equipped with Bf 109G-6s – would later join their parent *Geschwader* in their respective areas of operations, Major Karl-Heinz Leesmann's III./JG 1 taking up residence at Deelen, in Holland, and Hauptmann Ernst-Günther Heinze's III./JG 11 forming at Neumünster, north of Hamburg.

Then, for the first time in the Defence of the Reich campaign, Bf 109-equipped *Gruppen* would outnumber those flying the Fw 190 (by four to three). In addition, there were also two other *Staffeln* on Bf 109s – 2./JG 27, which had now moved from Amsterdam-Schiphol to Leeuwarden, and the *Jagdstaffel* Helgoland. As its name implies, the latter was based on the island of Heligoland (or, to be more exact, on the



smaller eastern island of Helgoland-Düne which, in comparison to the red sandstone bulk and towering cliffs of its neighbour, was little more than a sandbank).

Activated on 7 April 1943 and commanded by Oberleutnant Hermann Hintzen, *Jagdstaffel* Helgoland was unique in being equipped with the Bf 109T. This was a navalised, extended-span conversion of the basic Bf 109E originally intended for service aboard the never-to-be-completed aircraft carrier *Graf Zeppelin*.

This reorganisation of the Reich's aerial defences quickly paid dividends. The Americans' only incursion into German airspace in April was to result in their heaviest losses to date.

The target for the four Flying Fortress groups flying Mission No 52 on 17 April 1943 was the Focke-Wulf aircraft manufacturing plants on the outskirts of Bremen. All but eight of the 115 B-17s despatched bombed their assigned targets, causing severe damage to the works and the destruction of many completed Fw 190 fighters. But the Fortress crews also reported the strongest opposition yet encountered.

That opposition included two Fw 190 *Gruppen*, plus the Bf 109s of II./JG 11 (together with the attached *Jasta* Helgoland), III./JG 54 and 2./JG 27, as well as twin-engined nightfighters from NJGs 1 and 3. For more than two hours – from the time they neared the coast until well back out to sea again – the B-17s were subjected to waves of attacks from the defending Luftwaffe fighters. No fewer than 16 heavy bombers went down, six of these from the 91st BG's 401st BS alone.

The first *Gruppe* to make contact were the veterans of the Bight, albeit now operating as II./G 11 and led by a new *Gruppenkommandeur*. Wearing the Knight's Cross with Oak Leaves, Major Adolf Dickfeld had spent the early years of the war serving with JG 52 (see *Osprey Aviation Elite Units* 15). Latterly, he had commanded II./JG 2 (see *Osprey Aviation Elite Units* 1) in Tunisia. Putting this combined experience to good use, Major Dickfeld was credited with the first B-17 to be downed on 17 April. It took his overall total to 134.

In the formation behind Dickfeld, 5. *Staffel*'s Heinz Knoke had still not given up entirely on the idea of air-to-air bombing. But the missile he had so laboriously hauled aloft failed to find a target. It then took Knoke three firing passes to bring down the day's second Flying Fortress. Evidence suggests that this was the 91st BG's B-17F 41-24459 *Hellzapoppin*, one of the six 401st BS machines that failed to return from Bremen.



Perched on the cockpit sill of his Bf 109T (note twin access panels at lower right for the GM-1 high-altitude boost system), Leutnant Erich Hondt served briefly as the *Kapitän* of *Jasta* Helgoland during the summer of 1943 before taking command of 2./JG 11. With more than ten four-engined bombers among his final total – most, if not all, scored on the Fw 190 – Erich Hondt ended the war flying Me 262s with JV 44



Altogether, II./JG 11's pilots were credited with the destruction of six B-17s, with Unteroffizier Ewald Herhold of *Jasta* Helgoland adding a seventh. In return, four Bf 109G-1s were damaged in emergency landings, mainly due to lack of fuel after the lengthy engagement. One Bf 109T was lost in combat, crashing into the sea north of the island of Norderney after Unteroffizier Oskar Menz had successfully bailed out.

Of the other Bf 109 units involved, III./JG 54 claimed four B-17s in exchange for four *Gustavs* damaged and one lost. The fighter that went down was that flown by Knight's Cross holder Hauptmann Hans-Ekkehard Bob, the *Staffelkapitän* of 9./JG 54. Leading his *Staffel* in for a second frontal attack as the bombers withdrew from the target area, Bob misjudged his distance by a fraction and ended up ramming his chosen victim. Escaping from the mangled fuselage of his fighter, he found himself floating earthwards surrounded by ten other parachutes – the entire crew of the stricken B-17 had also wasted little time in bailing out!

Suffering from delayed shock, Bob meekly allowed himself to be rounded up with the others. It was not until they were all standing in line and he began automatically to unzip his flying overalls that one of his captors shouted, 'There's an *Ami* here wearing the Knight's Cross!' Suddenly coming to his senses, Hauptmann Hans-Ekkehard Bob quickly identified himself as a Luftwaffe officer.

Oddly, American records make no mention of an aerial collision among the day's losses, but additional details provided by Bob, plus the location (southwest of Bremen), suggest that his victim was the 306th BG's 42-29643. Whatever its true identity the Flying Fortress – victory number 57 for Hans-Ekkehard Bob – was the only four-engined kill of his long and illustrious career.

The pilots of 2./JG 27 also claimed two B-17s (one unconfirmed) north of the Dutch island of Ameland for no loss to themselves.

In addition to the Bf 109 successes detailed above, the Fw 190 *Gruppen* and the nightfighters were credited with a further 13 victories between them. The Luftwaffe's claims thus totalled 25 – nine more than the actual US losses. Once again, however, the gunners aboard the bombers far outdid their opponents, submitting claims for no fewer than 63 fighters destroyed, plus 15 probables and 17 damaged – 95 in all! This was an indication perhaps of just how rattled the bomber crews had been by the unaccustomed ferocity of the Luftwaffe's attacks. The true German casualties were five fighters lost (including two Bf 110s of NJG 1 which had collided in poor visibility far from the scene of the action), one written-off in an emergency landing and nine damaged.

The losses suffered by VIII Bomber Command over Bremen were double those for any previous mission. They represented a casualty rate of 15 per cent. Attrition on such a scale could not be borne over the longer term. For the first time questions began to be asked about the bombers' ability to survive unprotected in enemy airspace.

For the time being, however, there was little that could be done to remedy the situation. VIII Fighter Command had flown its last Spitfire missions in early April when the P-47 made its operational debut. Although the range of the heavyweight Thunderbolt exceeded that of the British fighter, it still could not proceed beyond the German-occupied Low Countries (where two P-47s had already fallen victim to an Fw 190



Hauptmann Adolf Dickfeld claimed his first Defence of the Reich B-17 on 17 April 1943 – the very day he assumed command of II./JG 11. He would add a second before taking up a staff appointment with the RLM in Berlin the following month

Hans-Ekkehard Bob (right) congratulates Wilhelm Schilling on completing 9./JG 54's 500th operational mission. Both would be wearing the Knight's Cross – awarded in Russia, where this photograph was taken – by the time they arrived in the west with III./JG 54 to take up Defence of the Reich duties in early 1943







A flight of Thunderbolts disport for the press at an airfield in the UK in the early spring of 1943. Their entry into service would be too late to save B-17F 41-24459 in the foreground. The 91st BG's *Hellzapoppin* would go down south of Bremen on 17 April 1943

of II./JG 1). The bubble of the 'heavies' invulnerability may have been pricked, but it had not yet been burst. Many still looked upon the advent of the new fighter as little more than a useful adjunct to VIII Bomber Command's operations. Before long everybody – not least the bomber crews themselves – regarded its presence as essential, and desperate efforts were being made to increase the P-47's range by the use of drop tanks.

Confident that they had hit the Americans hard over Bremen, the Luftwaffe fighter units awaited the bombers' next incursion. But it would be nearly a month before the enemy reappeared over the Reich. In the interim a third heavy bomber wing had been added to VIII Bomber Command's order of battle. This increase in numbers allowed it to mount multiple raids, attacking several widely separated targets at the same time in an attempt to fragment the Germans' fighter defences.

14 May's Mission No 56 was one such multiple effort. While groups of heavy bombers, some with fighter protection, were despatched against objectives in the Low Countries, the main force of unescorted B-17s and B-24s – over 100 strong – were sent against the submarine yards at Kiel, the major naval base on the Baltic Sea.

Once again, the Bf 109s of II./JG 11 (plus the attached *Jasta* Helgoland) provided the first line of defence. Among them was Leutnant Heinz Knoke, who had been appointed *Staffelkapitän* of 5./JG 11 a fortnight earlier. Still anxious to prove the validity of air-to-air bombing, Knoke led his entire *Staffel* high above the Flying Fortresses as they crossed the Schleswig-Holstein peninsula towards the target. But every time he attempted to manoeuvre his *Staffel* into position directly overhead a formation of bombers, it would weave out of the way 'as if they realised what we were trying to do'.

By now the leading B-17s were nearing their objective – the Germania shipyards on the eastern side of the port's inner basin. Having been



unable to carry out a formation drop, Knoke ordered his pilots to bomb singly once the enemy had cleared the target area. When his own bomb failed to detonate, Knoke resorted once more to his cannon. A first frontal attack against a group of B-17s flying a little distance apart from the main formation proved unsuccessful, but a second head-on pass a few minutes later hit home.

According to Knoke, 'the Fortress reared up like a stricken animal, before falling away in steep spirals to the right'. Fellow bomber crews who witnessed the demise of the 92nd BG's B-17F 42-30003 reported last seeing it 'circling and going down under control with one engine out and a stabiliser missing'. The bomber came down near Husum, on the western coast of Schleswig-Holstein. Whether the crew survived the crash-landing, or had bailed out during the descent, is unknown, but all ten duly became prisoners-of-war. It was Leutnant Heinz Knoke's fifth heavy bomber kill in the space of less than three months. It made him the first Bf 109 ace of the Defence of the Reich campaign.

Two more B-17s went down into the North Sea between Amrum and Heligoland shortly afterwards. One was credited to Hauptmann Egon Falkensamer, *Staffelkapitän* of 6./JG 11. Other fighter units had also joined the fray by this stage, and two Fw 190 pilots of I./JG 11, plus a nightfighter crew of NJG 3, also entered claims for Flying Fortresses.

Trailing the B-17s in over the target area, the 17 B-24Ds of the 44th BG – the only Liberator group involved in the Kiel mission – flew into a veritable hornets' nest of flak and fighters. Five bombers were shot down and every one of the other twelve damaged. The Bf 109s of II./JG 11 and III./JG 54 claimed seven Liberators between them, but lost five of their own number. One machine of 6./JG 11, damaged by return fire from a B-24, crashed west of Kiel after its pilot successfully bailed out. III./JG 54 reported two pilots killed, and they were almost certainly flying the two *Gustavs* of 9. *Staffel* which were seen to collide over the town itself.

Undeterred by the losses incurred on the Kiel mission (half those of the previous trip to Bremen), VIII Bomber Command despatched its nine Flying Fortress groups on another operation 24 hours later. It was to be a

twin-pronged attack on the North Sea ports of Wilhelmshaven and Emden. But the Wilhelmshaven force ran into ten-tenths cloud before reaching the target area and was forced to seek alternative targets. Most opted for the offshore airfields on the islands of Heligoland-Düne and Wangerooge.

The Luftwaffe responded by sending up the same units as it had done the day before. The two Bf 109 *Gruppen*, II./JG 11 and III./JG 54, claimed four and five victories respectively. One of II./JG 11's kills provided the last of the 135 victories amassed by Major Adolf Dickfeld, whose operational

With smoke from the Germania yards marking the B-17s' previous passage, two vics of Liberators cross Kiel on 14 May 1943





career was now about to come to an end with his appointment to the Staff of the RLM. A second B-17 fell to Dickfeld's successor as *Gruppenkommandeur*, Hauptmann Günther Specht (who had also claimed a B-24 over Kiel the previous day).

Specht was no stranger to the northern coastline, having scored his first kills as a *Zerstörer* pilot with I./ZG 26 over this very area in September 1939. Two months later he had himself been shot down and lost his left eye. Despite this disability he was now back on operations, and would become one of the leading *Experten* in Defence of the Reich.

II./JG 11's other two kills were credited to Heinz Knoke and one of his 5. *Staffel* pilots, Unteroffizier Helmut Lennartz. According to his own account of the action, Lennartz had brought his Flying Fortress down by air-to-air bombing. If true (the Americans made no mention of the incident), it was one of the relatively few successful attacks of its kind.

For the past six weeks II./JG 11 had gradually been replacing its original Bf 109G-1s with G-6s equipped with underwing cannon gondolas. And it was with these harder hitting 'gunboats' that the *Gruppe* was now scoring the majority of its successes.

In contrast to II./JG 11, which suffered no casualties, III./JG 54's five victories had been dearly bought. It lost four *Gustavs* and had two pilots killed. Both of the latter were Knight's Cross holders, recently decorated for their previous service on the eastern front. Since arriving in the west Leutnant Friedrich Rupp had been credited with two heavy bombers, but Hauptmann Günther Fink had failed to add to his Russian score. Both had gone down into the North Sea off Heligoland – a telling indication



Was it one of the six B-24s seen in the photograph on page 25 that provided the second Defence of the Reich heavy bomber kill for Hauptmann Günther Specht, the new *Gruppenkommandeur* of II./JG 11?

Oberleutnant Heinz Knoke poses for the camera in front of a new Bf 109G-6 'gunboat'. The individual number of this machine is not known, but it is clear from the tiny fragment just visible above the leading-edge of the wing that it is not his usual 'Black 1'. Note the narrow red band around the rear fuselage





that the air battles over the Reich were no respecter of reputations. Nor would these two be the last. It was a lesson that many more newcomers drafted in to homeland defence duties from other fighting fronts, tyros and highly decorated veterans alike, were to learn to their cost in the final two years of the war.

During the next week VIII Bomber Command's B-17s were sent out on two more double raids on northern ports – Kiel and Flensburg on 19 May, Wilhelmshaven and Emden two days later. With their confidence growing, the Bf 109 units of the Reich's Defence, still comprising just two *Gruppen* and two *Staffeln*, were credited with the destruction of 25 of the B-17s engaged in these operations (18 were actually lost) at minimum cost to themselves. It was a similar story in the first half of June when the next two such raids were mounted, also within a 72-hour period – Wilhelmshaven and Cuxhaven were attacked on 11 June, followed by Bremen and Kiel on 13th. But June was notable for other reasons.

Firstly, four more Bf 109 *Gruppen* were added to the defenders' order of battle. 11 June finally saw the long-awaited combat debut of Major Leemann's III./JG 1 when it was sent up against the B-17 force approaching Wilhelmshaven. Only one bomber was claimed – that by Leutnant Eugen Wintergerst, *Staffelkapitän* of 9./JG 1. It was victory 21 for Wintergerst, his 20th having been a Soviet MiG-3 fighter downed on the eastern front in September 1941. And a lot had happened to Wintergerst in the intervening 21 months.

On 24 September 1941 he had collided with fellow 4./JG 77 pilot Leutnant Herwig Zuzic behind enemy lines. Both were quickly captured by the Russians. But while prisoners together they decided to take a huge gamble. They would pretend to convert to the communist cause and allow themselves to be 'turned'. It worked. Once their Soviet captors were convinced that the pair had seen the political light, they were parachuted back into Rumania to operate as spies and saboteurs.

Instead, they immediately reported to the nearest German authorities. The questioning they were then subjected to was almost as harsh as the sessions they had undergone on the other side of the lines. Eventually,

however, their interrogators were satisfied and they were allowed to return to operational duty. But they were not permitted to serve on the eastern front for fear of being captured again. They had therefore been posted to IV./JG 1 in the west. And from here it was but a short move to the newly forming III. *Gruppe*, where both were appointed *Staffelkapitäne*, Herwig Zuzic of 8. and Eugen Wintergerst of 9./JG 1.

Wintergerst's single victory of 11 June was overshadowed by the ten claims made by the veteran II./JG 11, including one each for Hauptmann Specht and Oberleutnant Knoke. And a B-17 reported by the

Hauptmann Günther Fink, pictured here (left) with Oberfeldwebel Rudolf Klemm in Russia, was one of many experienced pilots who would fail to make the transition from eastern front to west. He went down over the North Sea before being able to achieve a single victory in Defence of the Reich





Americans as having been lost in a mid-air collision with an Fw 190 had almost certainly also fallen victim to a Bf 109. After carrying out a frontal attack on his chosen target, 9./JG 54's Unteroffizier Werner Büscher attempted to roll away above it, but his wing smashed into the nose of the 379th BG Flying Fortress. Both bomber and fighter went down, each minus a wing. Although wounded, Büscher managed to bail out.

Another Bf 109 unit new to the German Bight that scored its opening Defence of the Reich victories on this date was Hauptmann Kurt Ruppert's III./JG 26. Flying in from Belgium in late May, and bringing with it a wealth of experience gained from combatting the 'heavies' over the Low Countries, III./JG 26 had taken up residence at Nordholz, south of Cuxhaven. Its first successes were a brace of B-17s credited to two of Ruppert's NCO pilots, Feldwebel Niese and Unteroffizier Stutt.

With over 250 B-17s despatched, VIII Bomber Command's Mission No 62 of 11 June had been its heaviest raid to date. Adding credence to the 'safety in numbers' camp, only eight Flying Fortresses had been shot down by flak and fighters.

In stark contrast, of the 60 B-17s that attacked Kiel two days later, a staggering 22 failed to return. Scrambling from Jever at 0854 hrs, it was the pilots of II./JG 11 who, yet again, were among the first to engage the incoming bombers – although it was Unteroffizier Ewald Herhold of the attached *Jasta* Helgoland who sent the *Gruppe*'s first Flying Fortress down west of Neumünster. The second was reported by some sources as 'probably being hit by an aerial bomb'. If this is the case, it was most likely that credited to Leutnant Kilian, the only member of Heinz Knoke's 5. *Staffel* to make a claim on this date.

Over the target area the pilots of II./JG 11 added six more B-17s to the unit's collective scoreboard. Their only casualty was Unteroffizier Rohe, who had been wounded and bailed out near Neumünster. Ewald Herhold's Bf 109T had also been hit by return fire during the two passes that had been required to bring down his 95th BG Flying Fortress. Injured in the knee, he too was forced to take to his parachute. A second *Jasta* Helgoland pilot made an emergency landing in his damaged *Toni* on the island of Föhr.

III./JG 54 equalled II./JG 11's score of eight on this occasion, while III./JG 26's five victories against the 95th BG had all been achieved in the space of little more than ten minutes. The unit's sole casualty was Hauptmann Ruppert – the first Bf 109 *Gruppenkommandeur* to be lost in

**Gustavs of 9./JG 11 prepare to take off from Oldenburg in the summer of 1943. 'Yellow 4' in the foreground is possibly the machine in which Unteroffizier Alfred Thieme was shot down north of Osnabrück on 28 July**





the Defence of the Reich. His place was taken temporarily by acting-*Kommandeur* Hauptmann Rolf Hermichen.

The loss of over a third of the Kiel attacking force came as a huge shock to the Americans, especially after the perceived success of the Wilhelmshaven mission 48 hours earlier. The events at Kiel underlined the pressing need for adequate long-range fighter protection. But the machine that would, it was fervently hoped, be able to provide such protection was still a good six months away. Meanwhile, desperate efforts were being made to produce an auxiliary fuel tank that would at least enable VIII Fighter Command's existing Thunderbolts to poke their noses beyond the German border. And all the while the Luftwaffe was strengthening its Reich defences.

After the original I./JG 3 had been withdrawn from the Russian front in September 1941 for re-equipment and subsequent redesignation as II./JG 1, an entirely new I./JG 3 had been created in preparation of the eastern front's summer offensive of 1942. By year end this had taken the *Gruppe* as far as Stalingrad, after which it too was returned to the Reich for rest and re-equipment. Having spent several weeks at Döberitz, near Berlin, working up on Bf 109G-4s, I./JG 3, commanded by Hauptmann Klaus Quaet-Faslem, had been transferred to München-Gladbach (today's Mönchengladbach) in April 1943. Here, it took delivery of its first G-6 'gunboats' and was incorporated into the Defence of the Reich organisation. The *Gruppe*'s introduction to the air war over the homeland came on the day the enemy launched his first major attack on the Ruhr.

The main part of VIII Bomber Command's Mission No 65 of 22 June was a raid by ten B-17 groups on the synthetic-rubber plant at Hüls. The bombers' route to the Ruhr sidelined the Bf 109s of II./JG 11 far to the north. The bulk of the defensive burden fell on the Dutch-based Fw 190s of JG 1, who were credited with 15 B-17s downed. In addition, III./JG 54 claimed one and the 'newcomers' of I./JG 3 three more.

Amongst the Hüls raiders were examples of the USAAF's latest defensive weapon for its bomber formations – the YB-40. Somewhat ironically, while Heinz Knoke and his *Staffel* had been trying to turn their Bf 109 fighters into bombers, the USAAF had been experimenting with the use of the B-17 bomber as an escort fighter in the form of the YB-40!

In an attempt to improve the defensive capabilities of the otherwise unescorted Flying Fortress formations, 20 B-17s were equipped with additional gun turrets, armament and armour. Literally 'Flying Fortresses', these YB-40s had first been used over France in 1943. Eleven of them made the trip to Hüls, where they suffered their only combat loss – to flak. Like 5./JG 11's bomb-carrying Bf 109s, however, the heavily-laden YB-40s were not a success. Incapable of keeping up with the normal B-17 bombers in climb and combat cruise, they were withdrawn from service in August. Some were reconverted back into their original form, while others went on to serve as gunnery trainers.

On 25 June the B-17s returned to their more familiar North Sea stamping grounds. But heavy cloud over the mainland obscured the primary targets and the bombers were restricted to attacking two coastal convoys off the Frisian Islands. The defenders nonetheless put up eight *Gruppen* in opposition. Among them for the first time were the Bf 109G-6s of III./JG 11, this *Gruppe* being credited with two bombers –



one fell to Oberleutnant Hugo Frey, *Staffelkapitän* of 7./JG 11, and the other to Feldwebel Siegfried Zick (both of whom had been claimants for the first B-17 downed over Wilhelmshaven on 27 January).

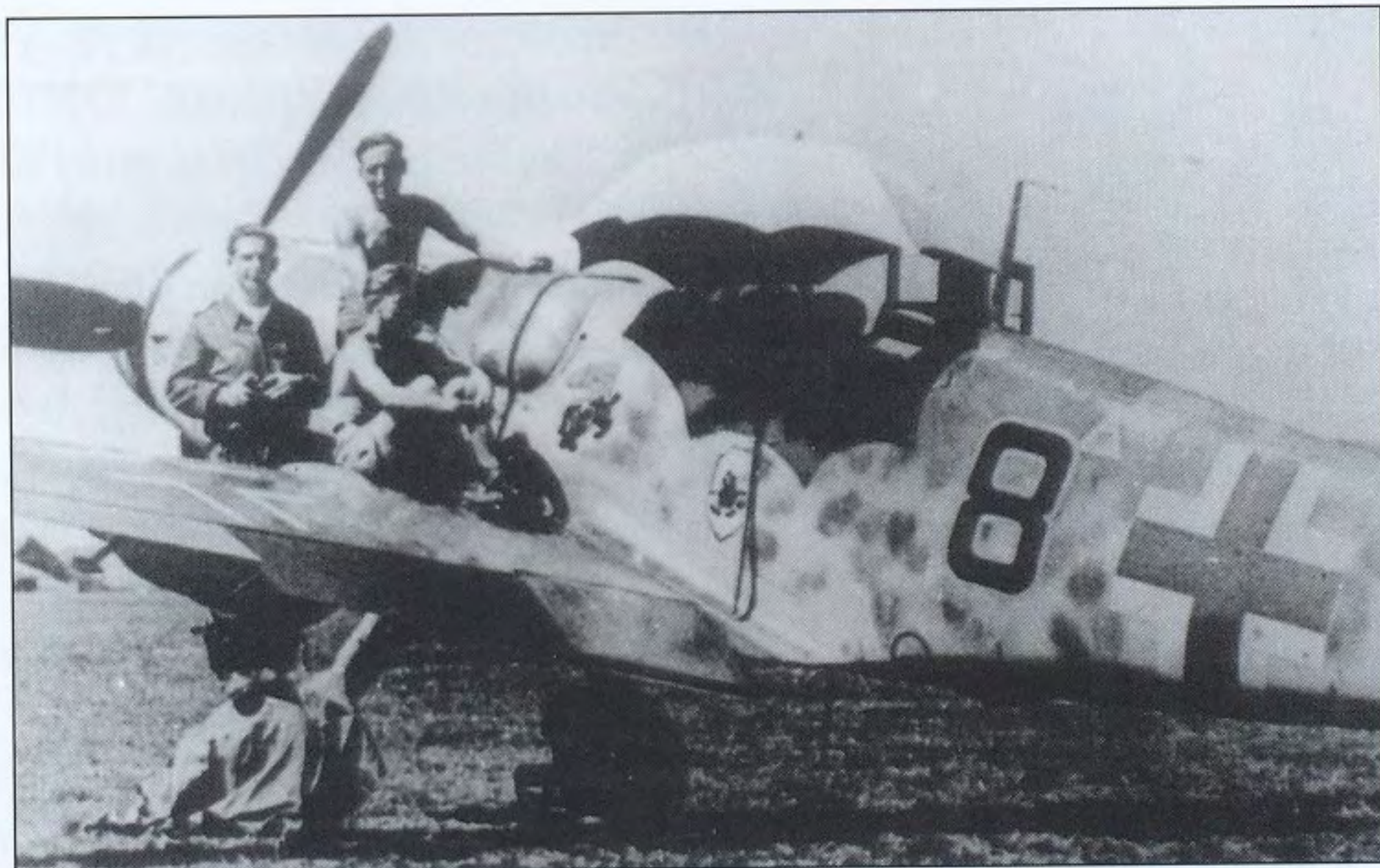
Of the other Bf 109 *Gruppen* engaged, III./JG 54 achieved a single victory and III./JG 26 three, while II./JG 11 and III./JG 1 claimed six and seven respectively. The *Gruppenkommandeure* of the latter two, Hauptmann Günther Specht and Major Karl-Heinz Leemann, were both successful with one bomber apiece. This took Specht's tally of heavy bombers since joining to five. But their units suffered disproportionately. II./JG 11 had just one pilot wounded (the indefatigable Heinz Knoke, hit in the hand while in the process of downing his ninth heavy bomber). III./JG 1 reported two pilots killed – including Leemann's *Gruppen-Adjutant*, Oberleutnant Friedrich Hardt, who had claimed his first victory only moments before he was himself hit – and three wounded.

For the next month there was very little operational activity over the Bight – just one major raid, and that was thwarted by solid cloud cover across the whole of northwest Germany – as RAF and USAAF Bomber Commands prepared themselves for Operation *Gomorrab*/'Blitz Week'. This was to be a six-day, round-the-clock combined bombing offensive against targets inside the Reich. While the RAF concentrated its nocturnal efforts against Hamburg, culminating in the devastating firestorm raid on the night of 27/28 July, the US Flying Fortresses were despatched against a range of military and industrial targets by day.

The weather on 25 July was still far from ideal. It forced two of the VIII Bomber Command formations to seek alternatives to their primary objectives at Hamburg and Kiel, and the third to abandon its mission against Warnemünde altogether.

Although the defending fighters were up in force, most units did not make contact until the B-17s were turning back out towards the sea. In a series of separate engagements, together lasting well over an hour, the Bf 109 *Gruppen* claimed a total of 14 bombers destroyed. II./JG 11 (plus the attached *Jasta* Helgoland) were responsible for six of them, but had four of its own pilots wounded. II./JG 26's three claims were made without loss. But III./JG 1's trio of B-17s cost the unit its *Gruppenkommandeur* when Major Karl-Heinz Leemann's Bf 109G-6 was hit and crashed into the sea shortly after his 37th, and final, victim had gone down.

Twenty-four hours later the bombers' main targets were the Continental and Nordhafen rubber works in Hannover and the U-boat yards at Hamburg. The Bf 109 units almost replicated their previous day's performance with claims for a total of 15 Flying Fortresses destroyed. Among the familiar names adding to their growing tally of heavy bombers were Günther Specht and Hugo Frey of II./JG 11.



In contrast to the purposeful air of the photograph on page 28, 8./JG 1's 'Black 8' enjoys a welcome siesta in the Leeuwarden sun. In addition to the *Staffel* badge (see colour profile 4) immediately aft of the *Beule*, this machine sports an example of a less commonly seen *Rotte* emblem (a *Rotte* was a formation of two aircraft). The leader of the pair, Feldwebel Josef Kehrle, carried the silhouette of a skinny huntsman in a shield below the cockpit of his 'Black 7'. The wingman, Unteroffizier Rudolf Einberger, displayed a more portly version of the same huntsman, which is just visible here beneath the shadow of the sunshade. Einberger would be killed in this aircraft when shot down in error by German flak over Bremen on 8 October 1943. A wounded Josef Kehrle wrote off his 'Black 7' in an emergency landing after tangling with P-47s over Holland on 1 April 1944



Less well known, perhaps, were two III./JG 1 pilots, both of whom were credited with their first B-17 kills on this date, thereby taking the overall score of each to exactly 40. Both were veterans of JG 3 and the eastern front. One, Feldwebel Alfred Miksch, had only recently been transferred to 8./JG 1 at Leeuwarden. The other, already wearing the Knight's Cross, was Oberleutnant Robert Olejnik, who had been a *Staffelkapitän* in the original I./JG 3 when it was withdrawn from Russia in September 1941 and redesignated to become II./JG 1. Since promoted to *hauptmann*, this was Olejnik's first day as *Gruppenkommandeur* of III./JG 1 in place of the fallen Karl-Heinz Leesmann.

On 28 July VIII Bomber Command despatched 15 Flying Fortress groups against two aircraft manufacturing plants – the Fieseler works at Kassel and the AGO factory at Oschersleben. The bombers' approach route took them over the North Sea where, as so often in the past, II./JG 11's Bf 109s up from Jever were the first to engage. In a running battle lasting less than 20 minutes, a dozen B-17s went down. *Gruppenkommandeur* Günther Specht was among those to score, as was the *Staffelkapitän* of 4./JG 11, Oberleutnant Gerhard Sommer. This took Sommer's total to double figures, including six heavy bombers.

But it was Heinz Knoke's 5. *Staffel* who claimed the lion's share, with no fewer than seven Flying Fortresses destroyed. All 11 of the *Staffel's Gustavs* were reportedly carrying bombs, and it was Unteroffizier Wilhelm 'Jonny' Fest who was credited with a remarkable treble. His missile apparently struck the 385th BG's B-17F 42-30257, which immediately careered out of control into the path of two other bombers, B-17Fs 42-3316 *Betty Boom* and 42-30285 – the unfortunately named *Roundtrip Ticket*. All three went down into the North Sea.

Many American sources, it should be pointed out, are at variance with the above description of events. Some maintain that the first B-17 suffered a direct flak hit. This is certainly possible if, as at least one report suggests, the bombers were not far west of the heavily-defended island of Sylt at the time of the incident. Others describe 42-30257 as being the victim of rocket attack, which is also feasible. Fw 190s of a test unit (*Ekdo.* 25) equipped with underwing rocket launchers had been attached to I./JG 1 for the past month and had already claimed the destruction of several Flying Fortresses.

The 21-cm air-to-air rocket – based on a German army weapon – would prove a valuable addition to the Luftwaffe's anti-bomber armoury. But, as far as is known, the first Bf 109 units did not receive this weapon until August.

Whatever the truth of the matter, the losses over the North Sea were only the start of the bombers' problems as they continued on over the German mainland. A total of ten *Jagdgruppen*, six flying Bf 109s, were deployed against them. Even before the last machines of II./JG 11 had broken contact, the *Gustavs* of III./JG 26 bored in, claiming three more B-17s. III./JG 11 got another two near Hannover, while I./JG 3 and III./JG 54 were credited with one apiece.

Having landed to refuel and rearm, a number of Bf 109s of II./JG 11 (and *Jasta* Helgoland) set off after the bombers again, catching up with them as they retired from the target area and adding another three to their collective day's score more than an hour after their first engagement.



Portrayed here as an Oberleutnant with JG 52 at the time of winning his Knight's Cross, Major Karl-Heinz Leesmann, *Gruppenkommandeur* of III./JG 1, was lost over the North Sea on 25 July 1943



But the sting of Mission No 78 lay in its tail. The bombers' return route took them out over Holland. As they approached the Dutch border the B-17s were still under attack from Fw 190s. Suddenly, near the town of Emmerich, the Focke-Wulfs were pounced upon by a group of P-47s! The US fighters had been fitted with jettisonable fuel tanks adapted from stocks of unpressurised ferry tanks. Although rudimentary, these added a crucial 30 miles or more to the P-47D's radius of action and, for the first time, allowed the Thunderbolts to penetrate German airspace.

While not entirely unexpected, the appearance of enemy fighters over the homeland came as a rude shock to the Luftwaffe. It may not have been as a direct result of this latest development – coincidences *do* happen – but 24 hours later the other two *Staffeln* of Hauptmann Ludwig Franzisket's I./JG 27 were pulled back from France and the entire *Gruppe* took up station at Münster-Handorf, less than 60 miles due east of the point where the P-47s had crossed the border. The Defence of the Reich's Bf 109 *Gruppen* now numbered seven.

VIII Bomber Command's targets on 29 July were the submarine yards at Kiel and the Heinkel aircraft works at Warnemünde, both on the shores of the Baltic. The response of the Luftwaffe was muted. III./JG 26 claimed four B-17s of the Kiel force close to the target area, including a brace for Hauptmann Hermann Staiger, *Kapitän* of 12. *Staffel*, but II. and III./JG 11 did not engage the retreating bombers until they were passing Heligoland on their way back out across the North Sea. Unusually, II./JG 11 failed to register a single success, but III. *Gruppe* was credited with three victories for one pilot wounded.

The following day saw the final raids of 'Blitz Week'. VIII Bomber Command's Mission No 80 took it back to the main Fieseler works at Kassel. I./JG 3 intercepted the bombers as they crossed into German airspace above the Eifel hills, and despite repeated attacks over the next 30 minutes its pilots succeeded in bringing down just two B-17s.

For some reason III./JG 1 and III./JG 11 were not scrambled until nearly two hours after I./JG 3 had been sent up. By that time the Flying Fortress formations had already bombed their targets and turned for home. They were not far short of Emmerich and the Dutch border when the Bf 109s finally engaged them. At almost the same moment large numbers of Thunderbolts appeared from the west.

Despite this intervention – three entire groups of P-47s, over 100 fighters in all, had been fitted with drop tanks and despatched to support the bombers' withdrawal – the two Bf 109 *Gruppen* managed to claim two B-17s apiece. But then they found themselves embroiled in what was arguably the first major fighter confrontation of the Defence of the Reich campaign (although much of the action actually spilled over into Dutch airspace).

III./JG 1 escaped with three *Gustavs* damaged, two of which had to be written off, but no pilot injuries. III./JG 11 was less fortunate, having four machines damaged, with one pilot wounded and one killed. The only success was the P-47 credited to 9./JG 1's Leutnant Eugen Wintergerst. The identity of his victim, the first US fighter to be claimed by a Reich's Defence Bf 109, is unfortunately not known – both the 56th and 78th FGs lost a single P-47C in combat on this date. But the incident marked the opening of a new phase in the escalating battle for Germany's skies.





USAAF fighters were unable to prevent the loss of this flak-damaged Flying Fortress, picked off by fighters while returning from another raid on Kassel on 30 July. The vertical tail surfaces of the 381st BG's B-17F 42-3100 can just be made out between the trees alongside the Apeldoorn to Zutphen road in Holland

Shown here wearing the Oak Leaves and Swords (awarded in 1942 for 101 victories with I./JG 77), Major Herbert Ihlefeld commanded the special high-altitude JGr 25 during its brief period of existence from August to December 1943



For the best part of the next fortnight, however, those skies remained quiet. During this period another of JG 3's *Gruppen* was withdrawn from the eastern front and added to the homeland's aerial defences.

III./JG 3 had served in Russia almost without a break since the invasion of June 1941. It numbered among its members several Knight's Cross holders and two 'centurions' (pilots with over 100 victories). The *Gruppe* had recently lost its long-serving *Kommandeur* when Major Wolfgang Ewald had been forced to bail out of his flak-damaged fighter behind Soviet lines. On 3 August

III./JG 3 flew in to Münster-Handorf to be welcomed by Ewald's replacement: Hauptmann Walther Dahl. Its stay was intended to provide a brief period for rest and re-equipment, allowing the *Gruppe* to complete the process of conversion from the Bf 109G-4 to G-6 already begun in Russia. But within days its pilots would find themselves facing the massed firepower of US heavy bombers.

Two other Bf 109 *Gruppen* were also established at this time. Initially designated *Jagdgruppe Nord* and *Süd (Ost)*, *Jagdgruppen* 25 and 50 were special units specifically set up to combat another menace currently plaguing Germany's defenders – high-flying reconnaissance Mosquitos (see *Osprey Combat Aircraft 13*). They were led by two of the Luftwaffe's most experienced fighter pilots. JGr 25, activated at Berlin-Staaken and operating out of Gardelegen, was led by Major Herbert Ihlefeld.

Based at Wiesbaden-Erbenheim, JGr 50 was headed by Major Hermann Graf. Soon the latter was also being tasked with developing new methods of combatting VIII Bomber Command's growing bomber strength. Its *Gustavs* were among the first to be equipped with underwing rocket launchers. And to assist him in his efforts, Hermann Graf – the 202-victory eastern front *Experte* who had already added a Mosquito and a B-17 to his score since arriving back in the west – had the clout to ensure that some of the most successful of his old *Staffel* comrades from 9./JG 52 in Russia joined him at Erbenheim.

On 12 August VIII Bomber Command reappeared over the Reich, 16 groups of B-17s being divided between two separate targets – a cluster of towns in the Ruhr and the city of Bonn, on the Rhine. Once again the weather intervened. The poor ground visibility forced many of the bombers to seek targets of opportunity in their respective areas. Only two B-17s were lost against Bonn, but no fewer than 23 of those attacking the Ruhr failed to return.

Based far to the north, II. and III./JG 11 were not involved in this day's action. But five of the Reich's other Bf 109 *Jagdgruppen* were scrambled against the bombers. Their fortunes, too, were mixed. III./JG 1, for example, was unable to claim a single success. The first *Gruppe* to engage was I./JG 3, which hit the bombers to the south of Wuppertal. The result





was one B-17 shot out of the formation by Oberfeldwebel Gerhard Schütte of 2./JG 3, which was then finished off by 3. *Staffel's* Leutnant Franz Schwaiger some 25 minutes later.

It might be worthwhile here to summarise briefly the three types of 'victory' that could be claimed against a US heavy bomber, each of which was worth a set number of points towards the conferring of awards and decorations. Firstly, there was the confirmed kill – a bomber seen to explode or disintegrate in mid-air, crash, ditch or make a forced landing (four points). Next came the so-called *Herausschuss* – literally the 'shooting out'. This meant damaging a bomber to such a degree that it dropped out of formation and became a straggler, with little or no hope of making it back to friendly territory (two points). Third, and last, was the *endgültige Vernichtung* – 'final destruction' – which was little more than the *coup de grâce* administered to any such lone straggler chanced upon (one point). The first two categories also counted as kills on a pilot's personal scoreboard. The last one did not.

Returning to 12 August, from Münster-Handorf I./JG 27 and the more recently arrived III./JG 3 took off together. Although the newcomers were able to get only a dozen *Gustavs* aloft for this, their first Defence of the Reich operation, they managed to claim three B-17s. The first fell to Leutnant Hans Schleef. It was victory 95 for Knight's Cross holder Schleef (whose previous kill had been a Soviet Yak-1 fighter downed over the Ukraine just 11 days earlier). Meanwhile, Hauptmann Ludwig Franzisket's I./JG 27, which was also operating for the first time in its entirety over the homeland, continued to harry the Ruhr attack force as it withdrew from the target area in a wide curve back towards the Belgian border. By the end of the 30-minute engagement its pilots had added six more B-17s to the *Gruppe's* collective total.

Five days later the Flying Fortresses went to Schweinfurt.

To be more precise, they went to Schweinfurt and Regensburg, for although Mission No 84 of 17 August 1943 was the most ambitious mounted by VIII Bomber Command to date, it followed the usual formula of striking at two targets simultaneously in order to split the

These pressurised Bf 109G-5s, each bearing its individual number on the rudder, are believed to be machines of JGr 25, photographed at Gardelegen

JGr 25's sister unit, JGr 50, was based at Wiesbaden-Erbenheim and commanded by an even higher-scoring Oak Leaves and Swords wearer than Major Ihlefeld – the 202-victory Major Hermann Graf





Luftwaffe's defences. While the nine Flying Fortress groups of the 1st Bomber Wing attacked the ball-bearing plants at Schweinfurt, the seven groups of B-17s making up 4th Bomb Wing would be despatched against the Messerschmitt factories at Regensburg. An added embellishment was that the latter would not then retrace their steps back to the UK, but continue on southwards across the Mediterranean to land in North Africa.

The planners attended to every detail, including the provision of marginally improved drop tanks for the P-47s which would enable them to venture just that little bit further into German airspace, at least as far as Aachen. But they had no control over the fickle English weather. While most of western Europe enjoyed clear skies, a dense layer of very low cloud descended over VIII Bomber Command's East Anglian bases. It was considered too much of a risk for nearly 400 'heavies' to take off and try to assemble in such conditions.

The start of the mission was therefore delayed, but the Regensburg force could be kept waiting for only so long if it was to arrive in far-off Algeria before the onset of darkness. Reluctantly, the order was given for the 4th Bomb Wing to take off, but for the 1st Bomb Wing to await the forecast improvement in the weather. It was a recipe for disaster. And a disaster is exactly what followed.

The interval of several hours between the formations' crossing Germany afforded the defending Luftwaffe fighters with two opportunities to maul the Regensburg groups – 24 'heavies' would fail to reach North Africa, although several of these were forced down by lack of fuel or mechanical failure. Following the first attacks, the *Gruppen* landed and refuelled in readiness for a second attack as the heavy bombers fought their way back to the UK. But, of course, the Regensburg B-17s did not reappear (at least, not on this date – they returned to England a week later via France, bombing a Luftwaffe airfield *en route*). It meant, however, that the Defence of the Reich's *Jagdgruppen* were fully armed and fully alerted when the delayed Schweinfurt force finally arrived on the scene.

The bombers' approach had been carefully monitored as they crossed the North Sea towards the Scheldt Estuary. JG 11 had not been involved in the earlier actions



The business end of the underwing launcher for the 210 mm air-to-air rocket. The nose of the missile can just be seen inside the tube

The firing cable was attached to the rear inner support strut of the launcher, and from there fed round through the backplate of the tube. This weapon was nicknamed the 'stovepipe' by the *Jagdwaiffe* crews that used them in combat





against the Regensburg force, but had been moved down from their bases in northern Germany to airfields in Holland and Belgium in anticipation of the bombers' return back out over the Low Countries. Instead, they now found themselves being scrambled against a second incoming formation following some three-and-a-half hours late on the heels of the first.

Lifting off from Gilze-Rijn shortly after 1430 hrs., Hauptmann Günther Specht's II./JG 11 sighted the enemy bombers near Antwerp. For almost 30 minutes they shadowed the Flying Fortresses across northeast Belgium, patiently waiting

for the escorting fighters to reach the limit of their range. At Eupen, just south of Aachen, the Thunderbolts duly turned back, rocking their wings in salute as they peeled away, leaving the B-17s to continue on alone.

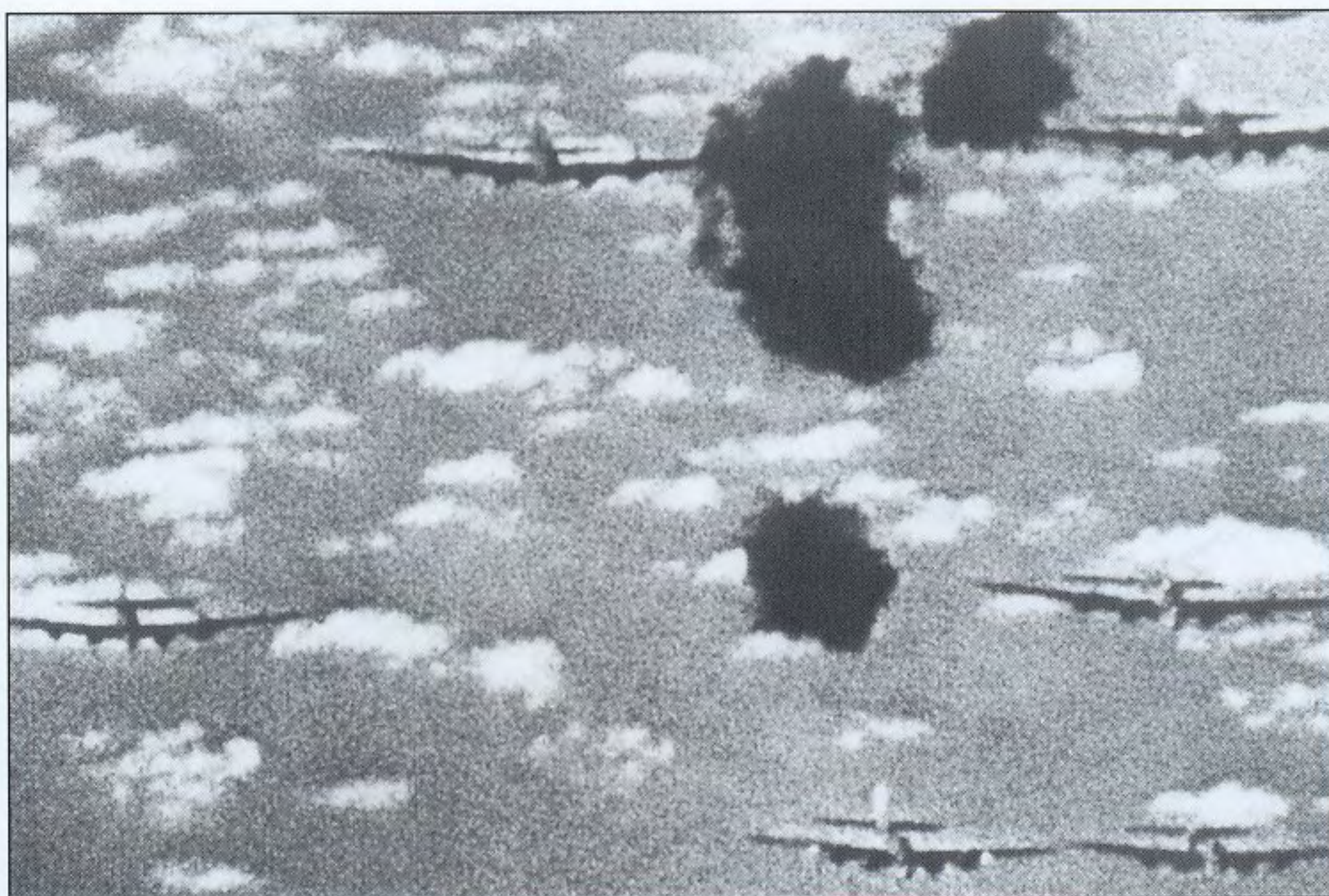
It was the moment the Luftwaffe pilots had been waiting for. II./JG 11 bored straight in, claiming three bombers within seconds of each other. These were almost certainly Flying Fortresses of the 381st BG, which was flying in the low group position of the leading wing on this day and suffered four of the first five losses to go down after Eupen. One of them had fallen to *Gruppenkommandeur* Günther Specht, who was also credited with a second some 20 minutes later.

It would seem that Oberleutnant Heinz Knoke had finally abandoned his flirtation with air-to-air bombing. His 5. *Staffel* was now equipped with underwing rocket launchers, but they achieved little success with the new weapon. Knoke's single missile failed to find a target (the other launch tube had already been shot away by return fire from the bombers). And although he has since described two of his pilots scoring direct hits – 'their bombers exploded in mid-air' – the two B-17s in question were only damaged. They were, however, forced to leave formation and both were picked off as stragglers later in the action.

The 27 minutes that elapsed between the departure of the P-47s at Eupen and the bombers crossing the River Rhine south of Mainz was the most ferocious part of the battle. In this short space of time 21 B-17s were shot down. This represented nearly 60 per cent of all the losses suffered by the Schweinfurt force. Over the rolling hills of the Eifel and Hunsrück regions, B-17s were going down at an average rate of almost one a minute!

They came under assault by fighters from up to a dozen *Jagdgruppen*. At the height of the battle it was estimated that they were being directly engaged by elements of at least nine of these units at the same time. The Luftwaffe pilots were practically queuing up to launch their frontal attacks. In seemingly endless succession, waves of fighters – mostly in line abreast, and 12 to 15 strong – hurled themselves at the struggling B-17s.

Not surprisingly, it was the leading wing of bombers that bore the brunt of the casualties, with 22 of its 57 aircraft failing to return from Schweinfurt, whereas the fourth and trailing wing lost just four out of 53.



The rockets were timed to detonate after a set distance had been travelled. These missiles have exploded harmlessly well behind the Flying Fortress formation they were aimed at

Two of the Schweinfurt Flying Fortresses downed on 17 August provided victories 16 and 17 for Hauptmann Günther Specht





Among the other Bf 109 *Gruppen* that attacked the B-17s west of the Rhine, III./JG 11 was able to achieve only one victory. III./JG 26 was much more successful.

Commanded now by Hauptmann Klaus Mietusch, this *Gruppe* had been transferred from Nordholz down to Amsterdam-Schiphol on 13 August. Having been up against the Regensburg force – and claiming six bombers, including a pair for Knight's Cross holder Oberfeldwebel Heinz Kemethmüller – III./JG 26 was scrambled a second time at the approach of the Schweinfurt formation. It was *Gruppenkommandeur* Mietusch himself who downed the first, some 24 miles beyond Aachen, and exactly four hours after Kemethmüller's double from the earlier raid. Hauptmann Mietusch then added a second, possibly another unfortunate of 381st BG, which came down just short of the Rhine. Two of his pilots also scored, taking the *Gruppe's* Schweinfurt tally to four.

Although Luftwaffe opposition eased noticeably once the bombers were beyond the Rhine, they were still being subjected to intermittent attack. It was at this stage that III./JG 1 claimed two B-17s to add to the Regensburg straggler that 8. *Staffel's* Feldwebel Helmut Fröhlich had despatched earlier in the day. Up from München-Gladbach, I./JG 3 had also been in action against the Regensburg formation. With two B-17s already to its credit, a successful attack on the Schweinfurt force now raised the *Gruppe's* total to four – and its day wasn't over yet.

Perhaps the most contentious claims of all were the 16(!) victories ascribed by at least one source to Major Hermann Graf's JGr 50. It has been suggested that at least some of these kills rightfully belong to instructors (themselves experienced frontline pilots) of the various nearby training establishments who often flew operations under the tactical control of JGr 50. A number of such smaller Bf 109 units, school *Einsatzstaffeln* and factory defence flights, are known to have participated in the Schweinfurt-Regensburg actions. Of JGr 50 itself, although Hermann Graf did not add to his score on this date, one of his ex-9./JG 52 veterans, Oberleutnant Alfred Grislawski – now *Kapitän* of his 1. *Staffel* – was credited with a B-17 from each of the raiding forces.

By the time the Flying Fortresses reached Schweinfurt, most of the single-engined fighters that had been in action against them had landed to refuel and rearm, unsure whether the B-17s would reverse course and return to the UK or disappear southwards as the Regensburg formation had done. When it became clear that the enemy was heading west back towards the Rhine, small groups of fighters went up to intercept them.

Despite his damaged wing Oberleutnant Heinz Knoke took off from Bonn-Hangelar at the head of an *ad hoc* formation and managed to score II./JG 11's fourth, and final, victory of the day. At München-Gladbach the *Gustavs* of I./JG 3 scrambled for a third time in less than six hours. And, as on the previous two missions, they returned with a brace of B-17s under their collective belt, thus bringing the *Gruppe's* score for the day to six. Hauptmann Quaet-Faslem's pilots had been fortunate, however – not in bringing down the two Flying Fortresses, both of which fell near Maastricht, in Holland – but in escaping without casualties themselves. For at long last, after battling for more than two hours unescorted through enemy airspace, the Schweinfurt bombers had finally made rendezvous with their withdrawal support P-47s southeast of Aachen.



The ordeal of the B-17 crews was almost over. The last act of the Schweinfurt drama was to be a battle between the fighters – P-47s versus the Luftwaffe – over a wide tract of the Belgian-Dutch border to the north of Liège.

III./JG 3's part in the day's proceedings so far had been anything but successful. Initially scrambled from Münster-Handorf shortly after 1200 hrs, Hauptmann Walther Dahl's *Gruppe* had failed to find the Regensburg force. They landed at Woensdrecht in Holland an hour later. From here they took off again some 90 minutes later still to intercept the incoming Schweinfurt formation – only to be misdirected by

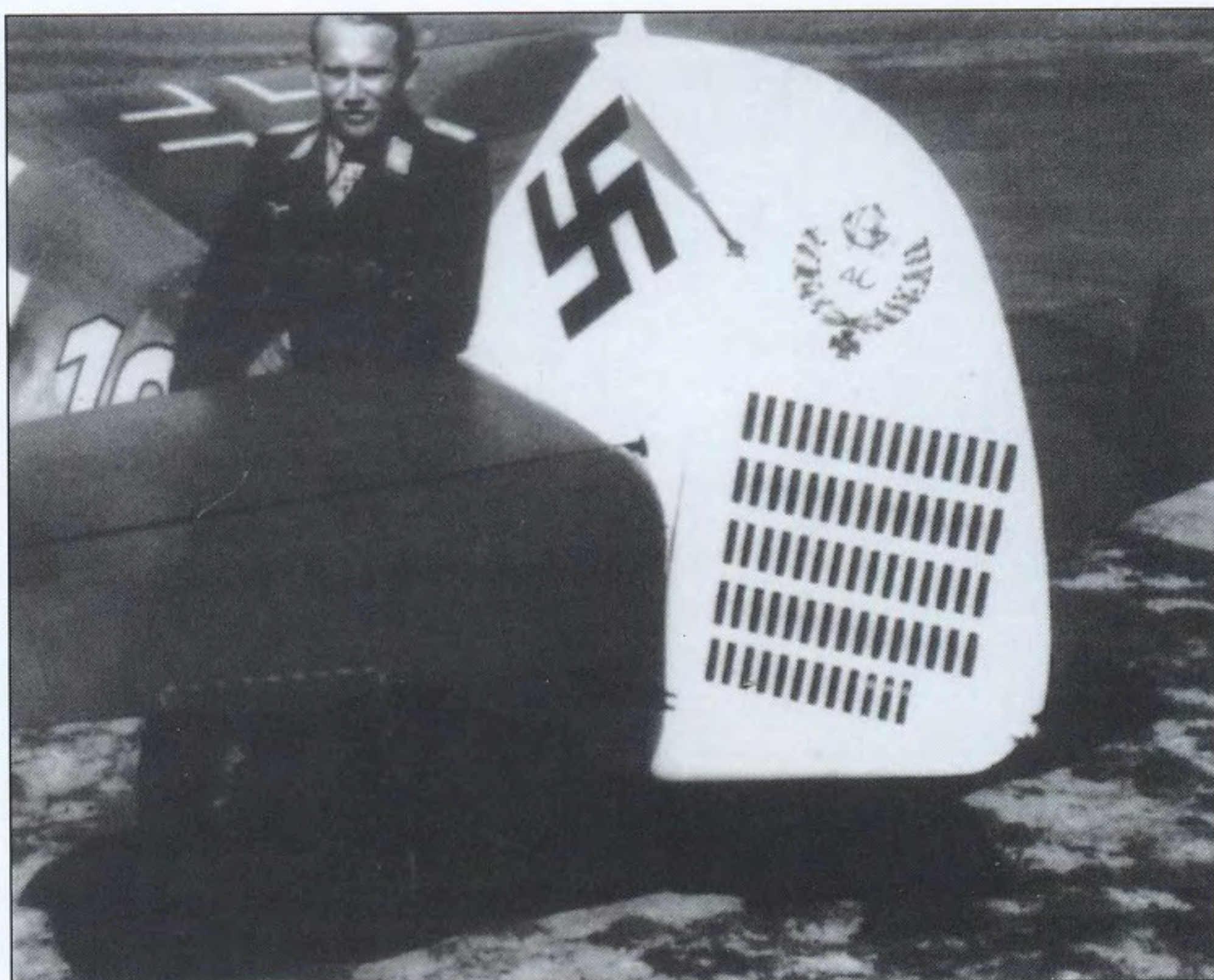
ground control straight into a large gaggle of RAF Spitfires over northern Belgium. While Dahl's pilots were otherwise busily engaged – losing a pair of Bf 109G-6s, but suffering no pilot casualties – the Flying Fortresses sailed past high overhead some 12 miles away.

By the time of its third take-off late in the afternoon, III./JG 3 was able to put only two *Schwärme* (eight aircraft) into the air. Led by Hauptmann Wilhelm Lemke, *Kapitän* of 9. *Staffel*, they tried to attack a force of some '80 bombers' but were thwarted by the arrival of a group of Thunderbolts. In the ensuing free-for-all III./JG 3 achieved its first victories of the day – a trio of P-47s for no loss to themselves. Two of the Thunderbolts went to Wilhelm Lemke. They brought the eastern front veteran's score to 127.

Some 30 minutes later, a long and determined chase by Unteroffizier Hinz was finally rewarded by his being credited with one of the 'heavies'. His victim was probably the 305th BG's B-17F 41-24564 'Patches', which crashed near Diest, in Belgium. It was the last Schweinfurt B-17 to come down on European soil (two more were subsequently forced to ditch in the North Sea before reaching England's shores).

The Luftwaffe's fighters had been remarkably successful in combatting the Schweinfurt-Regensburg raids. They had also sustained remarkably few losses. Although a number of Bf 109 pilots had been wounded, only four had been killed – two each from III./JG 26 and JGr 50.

For VIII Bomber Command it was a different story altogether. Mission No 84 had been intended to mark the first anniversary of the operational debut of the command's B-17s over Rouen/Sotteville exactly one year earlier. Instead, it had turned into an unmitigated disaster. The combined loss of 60 bombers in the two raids, plus very nearly three times that number damaged (out of a total 376 despatched), came as a staggering blow. Hard as it was to accept, the stark fact was that the B-17s could *not* survive on their own in hostile airspace. The voices of even the most fervent adherents of the 'unescorted self-defending bomber formation' policy were stilled. There were to be no more deep penetrations into the Reich until adequate fighter protection could be provided.



The two B-17Fs downed by JGr 50's Oberleutnant Alfred Grislawski on 17 August 1943 took his victory tally to 111. This photograph was taken the following month, by which time kill number 112 had been added – a B-17F claimed southeast of Stuttgart on 6 September. Note the machine's individual number on the aft fuselage behind the *Balkenkreuz*



## COLOUR PLATES

1

Bf 109G-1/R2y 'Black 3' of Leutnant Heinz Knoke,  
2./JG 1, Jever, February 1943



2

Bf 109G-6 'While Double Chevron' of Hauptmann Friedrich  
Eberle, *Gruppenkommandeur* III./JG 1, Leeuwarden,  
October 1943



3

Bf 109G-6 'White 20' of Hauptmann Friedrich  
Eberle, *Gruppenkommandeur* III./JG 1,  
München-Gladbach, March 1944



4

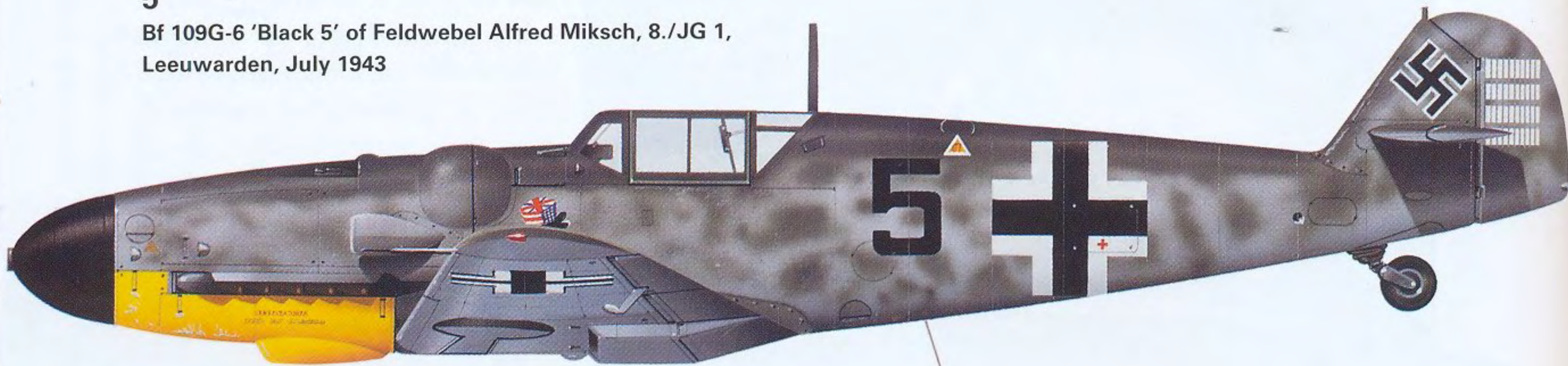
Bf 109-G-6 'Black 1' of Oberleutnant Herwig Zuzic,  
*Staffelkapitän* 8./JG 1, Leeuwarden, June 1943





5

Bf 109G-6 'Black 5' of Feldwebel Alfred Miksch, 8./JG 1, Leeuwarden, July 1943



6

Bf 109G-4 'Black Double Chevron 1' of Hauptmann Klaus Quaet-Faslem, *Gruppenkommandeur* I./JG 3 'Udet', München-Gladbach, circa May 1943



7

Bf 109G-6/AS 'Black 14' of Unteroffizier Horst Petzschler, 2./JG 3 'Udet', Burg bei Magdeburg, May 1944



8

Bf 109G-6 'Double Chevron' of Major Kurt Brändle, *Gruppenkommandeur* II./JG 3 'Udet', Schiphol, October 1943





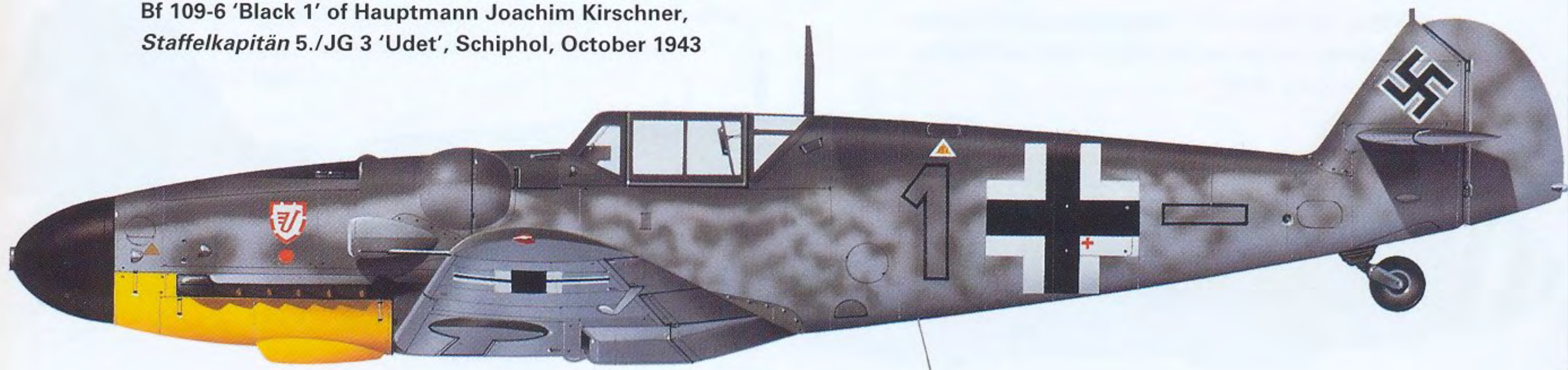
9

Bf 109G-6 'White 10' of Leutnant Franz Ruhl, *Staffelkapitän*  
4./JG 3 'Udet', Rotenburg, February 1944



10

Bf 109-6 'Black 1' of Hauptmann Joachim Kirschner,  
*Staffelkapitän* 5./JG 3 'Udet', Schiphol, October 1943



11

Bf 109G-6y 'White 1' of Hauptmann Karl-Heinz Langer,  
*Staffelkapitän* 7./JG 3 'Udet', Bad Wörishofen, Autumn  
1943



12

Bf 109G-6 'Yellow 7' of Hauptmann Wilhelm Lemke,  
*Staffelkapitän* 9./JG 3 'Udet', Bad Wörishofen, Autumn  
1943





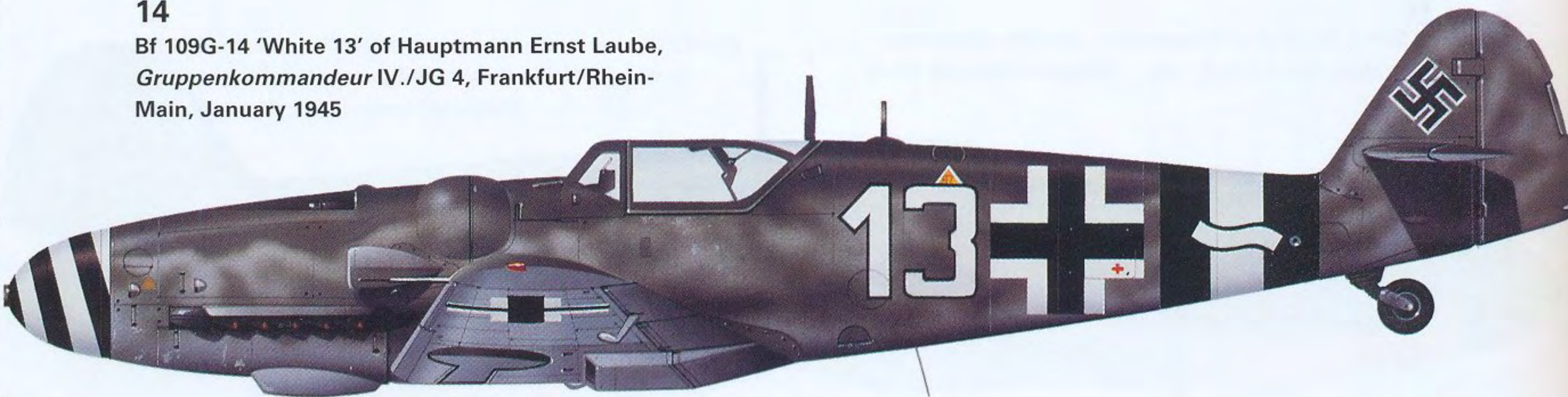
13

Bf 109G-6 'Black Double Chevron' of Hauptmann Wilhelm Moritz, *Gruppenkommandeur IV./JG 3 'Udet'*, Salzwedel, May 1944



14

Bf 109G-14 'White 13' of Hauptmann Ernst Laube, *Gruppenkommandeur IV./JG 4*, Frankfurt/Rhein-Main, January 1945



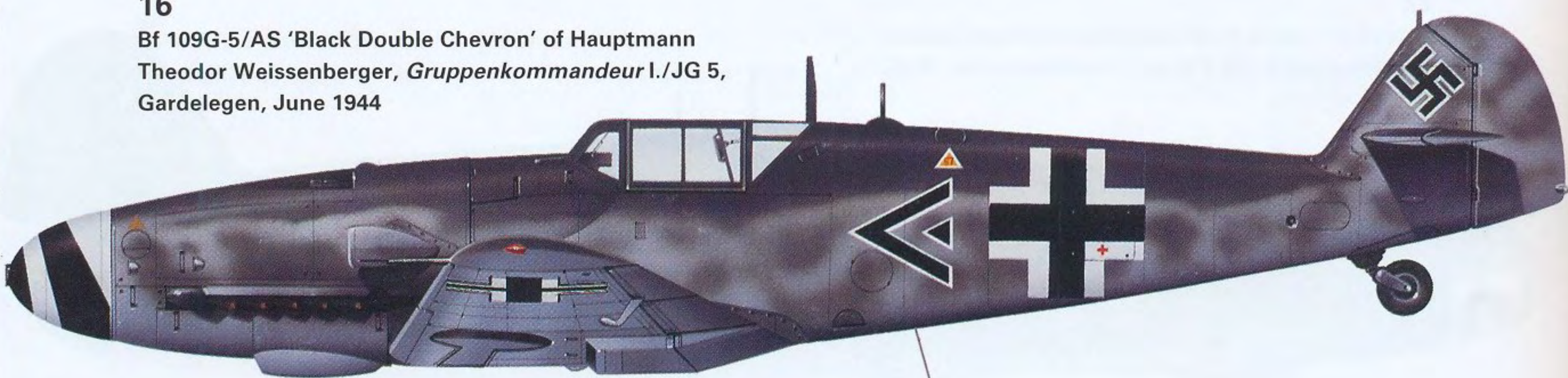
15

Bf 109G-14/ASy 'Black 13' of Oberleutnant Ernst Scheufele, *Staffelkapitän 14./JG 4*, Reinersdorf, October 1944



16

Bf 109G-5/AS 'Black Double Chevron' of Hauptmann Theodor Weissenberger, *Gruppenkommandeur I./JG 5*, Gardelegen, June 1944





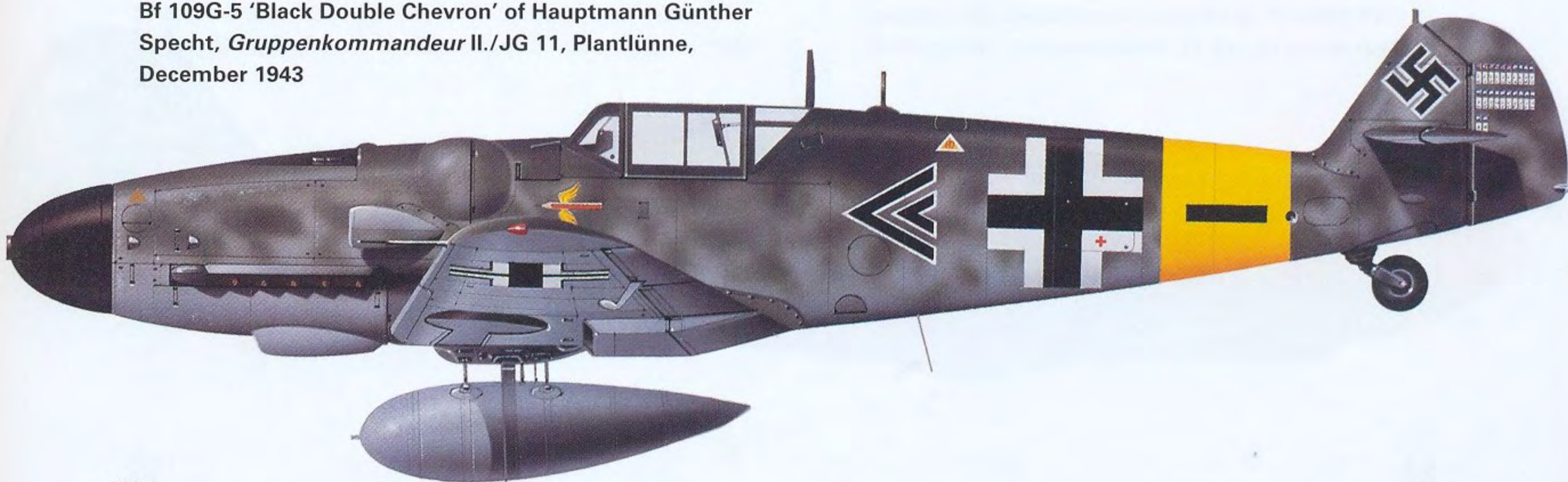
17

Bf 109 G-6 'White 1' of Oberleutnant Günther Schwanecke,  
Staffelkapitän 4./JG 5, Salzwedel, July 1944



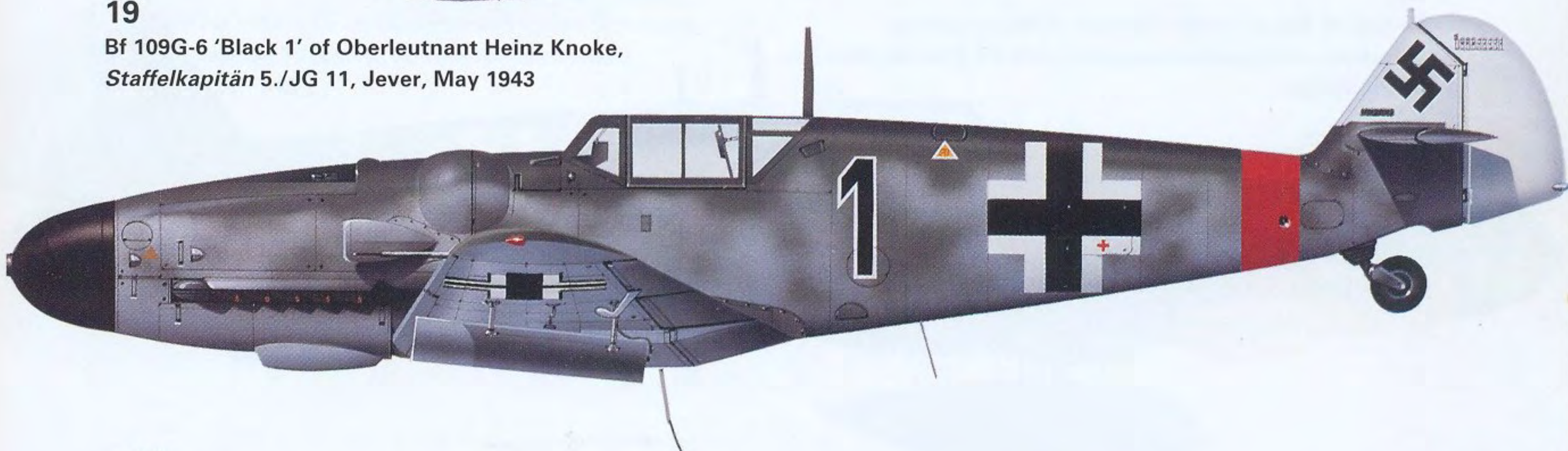
18

Bf 109G-5 'Black Double Chevron' of Hauptmann Günther  
Specht, Gruppenkommandeur II./JG 11, Plantlünne,  
December 1943



19

Bf 109G-6 'Black 1' of Oberleutnant Heinz Knoke,  
Staffelkapitän 5./JG 11, Jever, May 1943



20

Bf 109G-6 'Black 10' of Feldwebel Hans-Gerd Wennekers,  
5./JG 11, Jever, June 1943





21

Bf 109G-6y 'Yellow 1' of Oberleutnant Hermann Hintzen,  
Staffelkapitän 6./JG 11, Jever, June 1943



22

Bf 109T 'Black 6' of Oberleutnant Herbert Christmann,  
Staffelkapitän 11./JG 11, Lister/Norway, Spring 1944



23

Bf 109G-6 'Black Double Chevron' of Major Ludwig  
Franzisket, Gruppenkommandeur I./JG 27, Fels am Wagram,  
February 1944



24

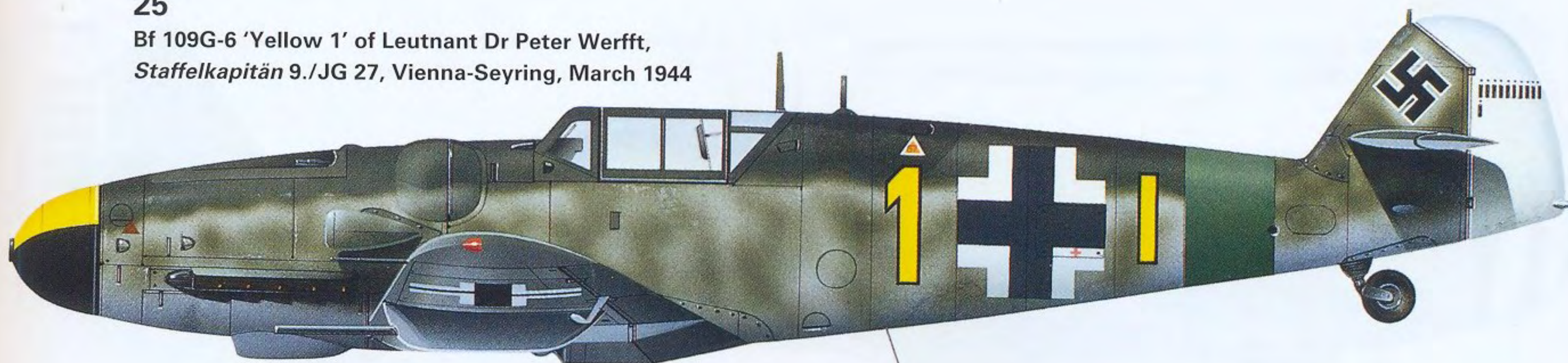
Bf 109G-6 'Yellow 3' of Leutnant Willy Kientsch,  
Staffelkapitän 6./JG 27, Wiesbaden-Erbenheim,  
November 1943





25

Bf 109G-6 'Yellow 1' of Leutnant Dr Peter Werfft,  
Staffelkapitän 9./JG 27, Vienna-Seyring, March 1944



26

Bf 109G-6 'Black Double Chevron' of Hauptmann Otto  
Meyer, Gruppenkommandeur IV./JG 27, Graz, March 1944



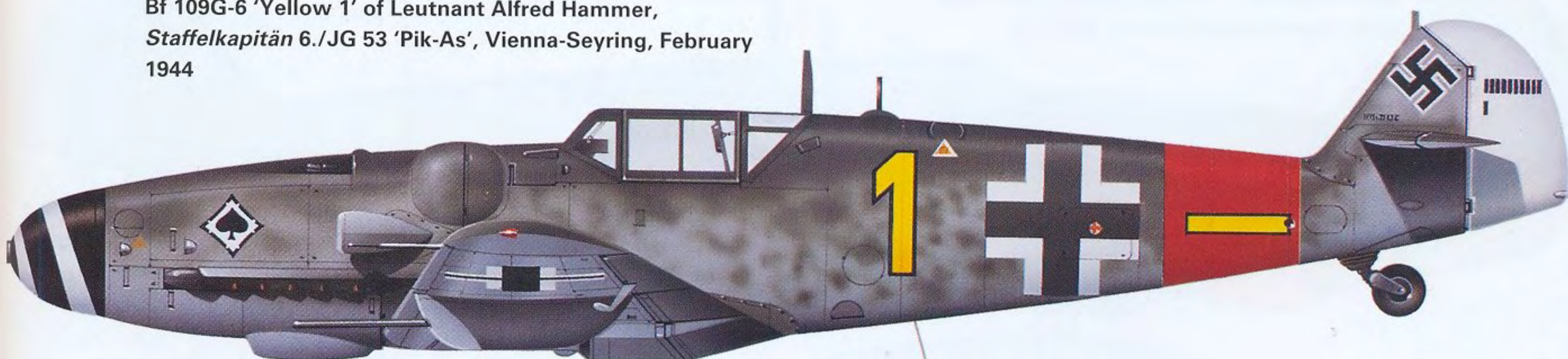
27

Bf 109G-6 'White 10' of Oberleutnant Alfred Grislawski,  
Staffelkapitän 1./JGr 50, Wiesbaden-Erbenheim,  
September 1943



28

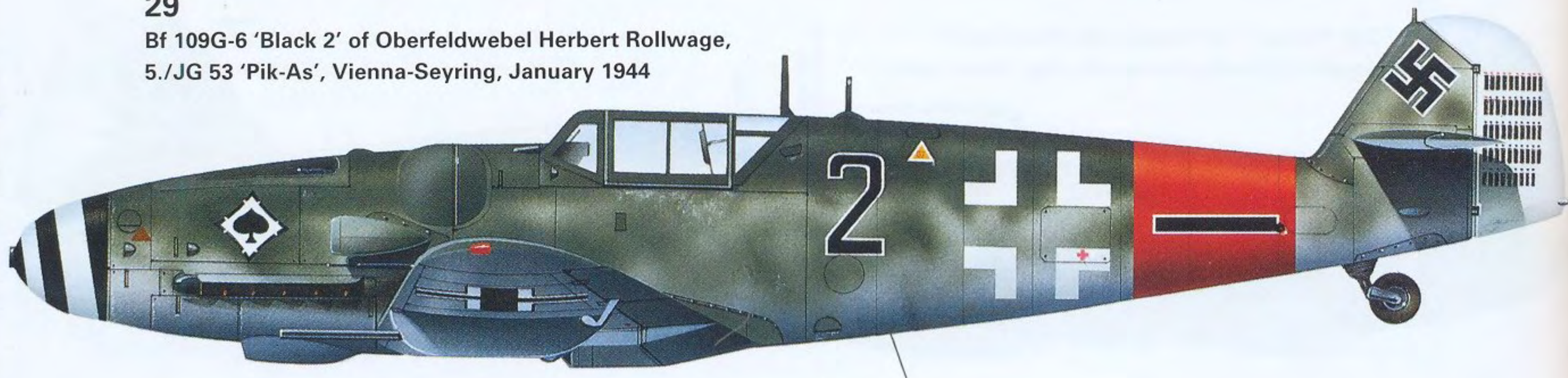
Bf 109G-6 'Yellow 1' of Leutnant Alfred Hammer,  
Staffelkapitän 6./JG 53 'Pik-As', Vienna-Seyring, February  
1944





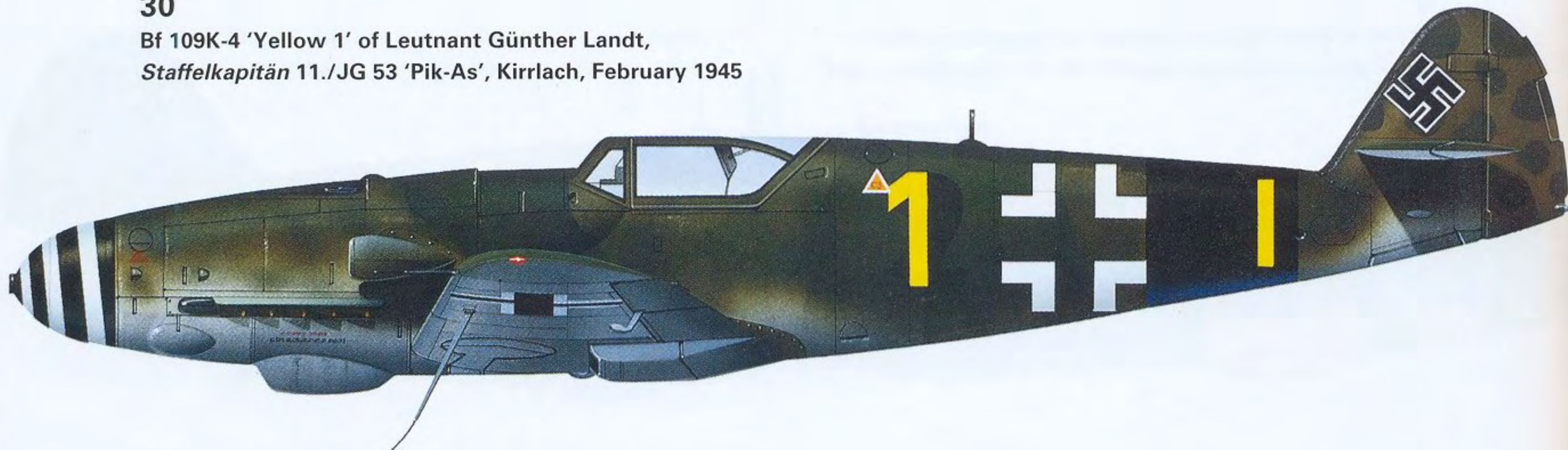
29

Bf 109G-6 'Black 2' of Oberfeldwebel Herbert Rollwage,  
5./JG 53 'Pik-As', Vienna-Seyring, January 1944



30

Bf 109K-4 'Yellow 1' of Leutnant Günther Landt,  
Staffelkapitän 11./JG 53 'Pik-As', Kirrlach, February 1945



31

Bf 109G-6 'Yellow 1' of Oberleutnant Wilhelm Schilling,  
Staffelkapitän 9./JG 54, Ludwigslust, February 1944



32

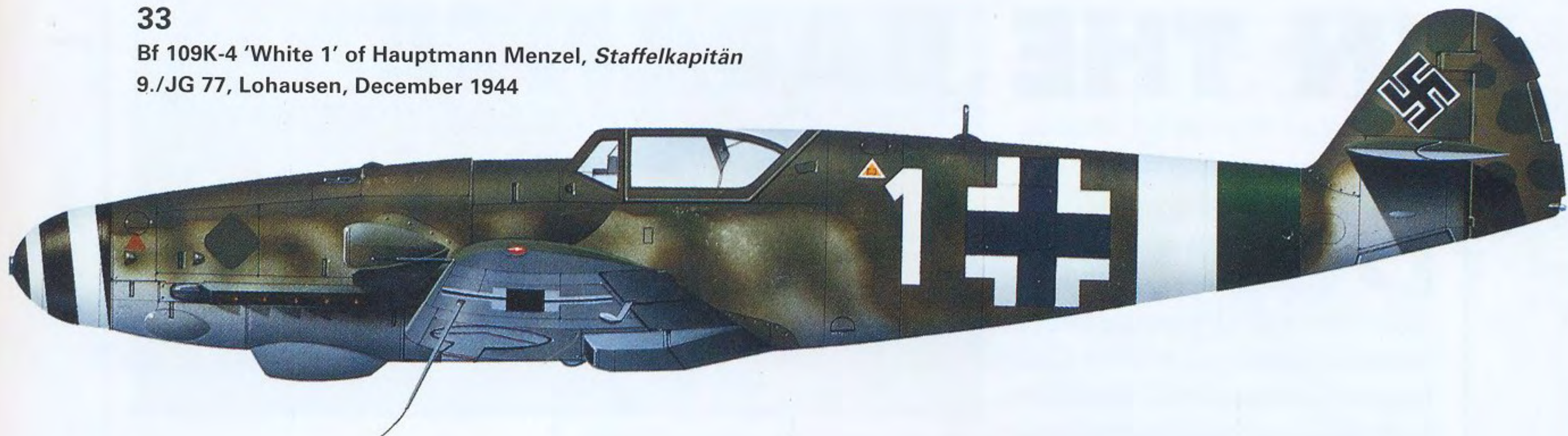
Bf 109G-5 'Yellow 11' of Feldwebel Fritz Ungar,  
9./JG 54, Ludwigslust, January 1944





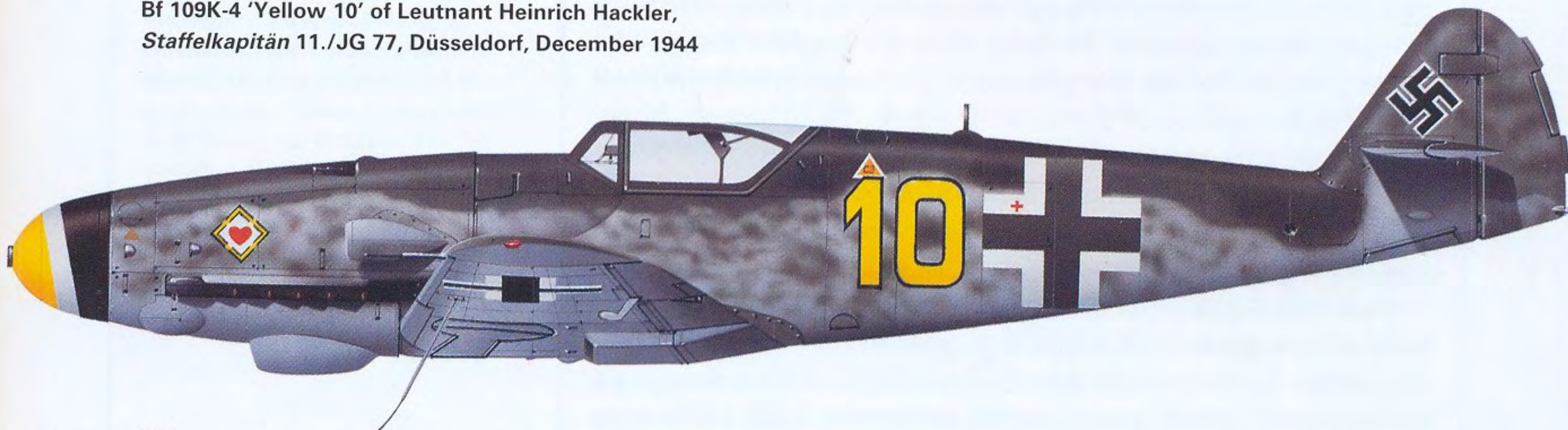
33

Bf 109K-4 'White 1' of Hauptmann Menzel, *Staffelkapitän*  
9./JG 77, Lohausen, December 1944



34

Bf 109K-4 'Yellow 10' of Leutnant Heinrich Hackler,  
*Staffelkapitän* 11./JG 77, Düsseldorf, December 1944



35

Bf 109G-10 'Red 2' of Feldwebel Eberhard Gzik, 2./JG 300,  
Borkheide, September 1944



36

Bf 109G-6 'White 6' of Unteroffizier Willi Reschke, 1./JG 302,  
Götzendorf, July 1944





# IN THE BALANCE

During the lull that followed Schweinfurt, VIII Bomber Command underwent reorganisation. The B-17s of 1st and 4th Bomb Wings now operated as the 1st and 3rd Bomb Divisions, while the B-24s – recently returned from their temporary deployment to North Africa and participation in the historic raid on the Rumanian oilfields at Ploesti – became the 2nd Bomb Division.

All three formations were involved in the next incursion into Germany on 6 September. While the Liberators carried out a diversionary sweep over the North Sea, the two Flying Fortress divisions attempted to reach Stuttgart 'via the side door' by flying down the length of France. The former prompted no reaction whatsoever. The latter has been described as 'one of the most costly fiascos in Eighth Air Force history'. Heavy clouds in the target area caused many groups to become separated. Forty-five B-17s failed to return, nearly half of them (predominantly from the 1st BD) crash-landing or ditching through shortage of fuel. Bombers came down in Switzerland, France, the Channel and the North Sea!

While VIII Bomber Command had been reorganising, the Luftwaffe had been strengthening. In August three more Bf 109 *Gruppen* had been returned to the Reich from other fronts – II./JG 3 from Russia and IV./JG 3 and II./JG 27 from Italy. The two JG 3 *Gruppen* were not yet operational, but the Stuttgart 'fiasco' of 6 September provided II./JG 27 with its baptism of fire in the Defence of the Reich.

Hauptmann Werner Schroer and his pilots were no strangers to US heavy bombers. They had already downed nearly 50 B-17s and B-24s during their previous six months service in the Mediterranean. Schroer himself had accounted for a dozen of them. Now they scrambled from their new base at Eschborn, on the outskirts of Frankfurt, to take on the UK-based Flying Fortresses of VIII Bomber Command for the first time.

Despite the abysmal conditions, they found and attacked a large formation of B-17s in the Stuttgart area. The 20 *Gustavs* kept up their assault for the best part of half-an-hour, by the end of which time they had claimed nine Flying Fortresses. A treble for the *Gruppenkommandeur* took Schroer's personal score to 88. Two of his *Staffelkapitäne* were also successful, 6./JG 27's Leutnant Willy Kientsch getting two and Hauptmann Otto Meyer of 4./JG 27 one.

It had been an impressive debut – one the unit would equal, but never surpass, throughout the remainder of its Defence of the Reich career. The day was marred only by the loss of *Gruppen-Adjutant* Oberleutnant Dankward *Freiherr* von Maltzahn.

Hauptmann Werner Schroer, Mediterranean *Experte* and *Gruppenkommandeur* of II./JG 27, would claim his first three Defence of the Reich victories – a trio of Flying Fortresses – during the 6 September 1943 raid on Stuttgart







The most successful *Gruppe* in action against the 6 September 1943 Stuttgart raiders was III./JG 3. Oberfeldwebel Alfred Surau of 9. *Staffel*, seen here perched on the wheel of his 'Yellow 6', was credited with two of the *Gruppe's* ten victories. Note 9./JG 3's striking yellow, black and white 'eye' emblem adorning the *Beule*

(HQ) of JG 3 had been recalled from the Russian front back in the late spring and had since been stationed – minus aircraft – at München-Gladbach. On the very day of the attack on Stuttgart, it was scheduled to transfer to Rheinberg, on the western fringes of the Ruhr, where it would receive its new Bf 109G-6s the following month. Unless he happened to be visiting one of JG 3's component *Gruppen* – all four of which were now back in Germany – on this date, it is difficult to know how, and from whom, Oberleutnant von Kap-herr managed to 'borrow' the machine that enabled him to take off and claim his first four-engined bomber!

It was one of JG 3's *Gruppen* that was credited with the highest number of kills against the Stuttgart B-17s. As if to make up for their disappointing performance during the Schweinfurt-Regensburg raid, the pilots of III./JG 3 downed no fewer than ten Flying Fortresses in an engagement that lasted for more than 30 minutes, and took them from Stuttgart, across the Rhine and westwards into France.

*Gruppenkommandeur* Hauptmann Walther Dahl claimed his first two 'heavies' to add to his Russian front total of 51. Another double went to 9. *Staffel's* Oberfeldwebel Alfred Surau (who thus remained ten behind his *Kommandeur* with 43), while two of the *Gruppe's* most successful eastern front *Experten*, Hauptmann Wilhelm Lemke and Leutnant Hans Schleef, each claimed one to bring their scores to 128 and 96 respectively.

Exactly three weeks later, September's only other incursion into Reich airspace took VIII Bomber Command's B-17s back over very familiar territory indeed. But the 27 September attack on the North Sea port of

Emden broke new ground in other ways. Four of the Fortresses were equipped with British H2S radar. Although three of the sets promptly malfunctioned, this was the first step down an electronic road that would eventually allow the US bombers to hit targets through solid cloud.

Another milestone was the introduction of new 108-gallon 'paper' drop tanks which – for the first time ever – permitted relays of P-47s to escort the bombers all the way to a target inside the Reich.

7./JG 3's 'comet' emblem makes an equally distinctive backdrop as Feldwebel Kurt Gräf (left) gets his point across to two fellow NCO pilots at Bad Wörishofen in October 1943





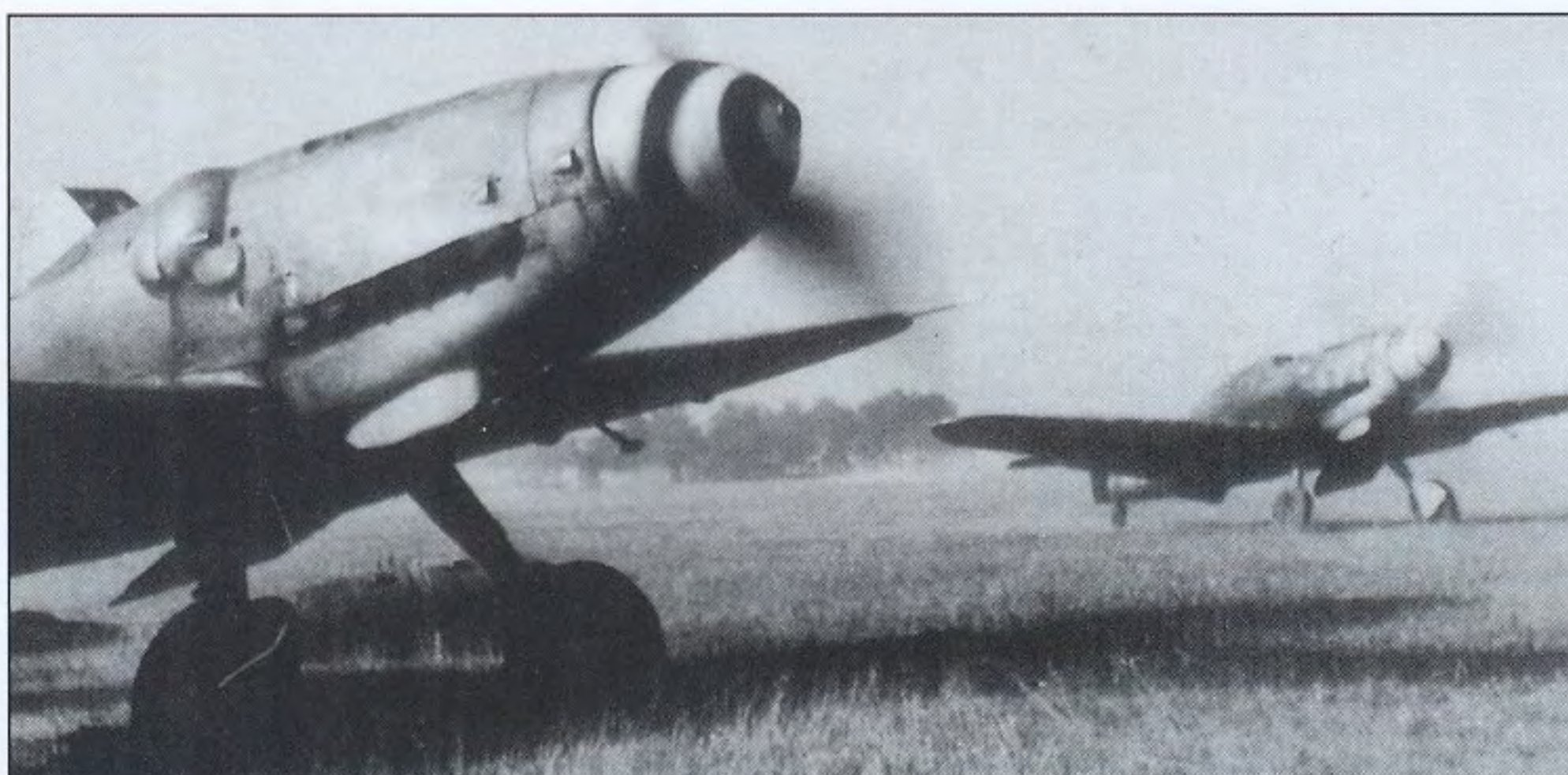
The unexpected appearance of the Thunderbolts was a huge shock to the resident JG 11, which had long regarded Germany's North Sea coastline as its own. II./JG 11 had scrambled from Jever as usual. Within minutes the bombers were in sight, curving in towards Emden from the south. But then Feldwebel Hans-Gerd Wennekers spotted a large number of fighters high above the bomber formation. As they had radial engines, he at first took them to be Fw 190s. But there was something distinctly odd about them – and why weren't they attacking? Wennekers and his wingman decided to go up and have a closer look.

As soon as the pair began to climb, the 'Focke-Wulfs' immediately dived down towards them. Wennekers only realised he was under attack when he heard his wingman's excited shout over the RT. 'Look out! They're trying to shoot you down!' The two *Gustavs* stood on their wingtips and pointed their noses earthwards. It was an unwise move. Luftwaffe pilots would quickly learn that the one thing you did *not* do was try to out-dive a seven-ton Thunderbolt. This time, however, Wennekers got away with it. But his rapid descent had taken him out of the frying pan into the fire. As he pulled out of his dive, he found himself in the middle of a formation of B-17s, staring at the dorsal hatch gunner of the nearest bomber less than 65 ft away. No doubt equally shocked by this sudden apparition, the gunner promptly ducked back inside the fuselage!

By this time other pilots of the rocket-equipped 5. *Staffel* had made their first pass at the bombers. Two Fortresses had gone down, one claimed by Heinz Knoke, when 'suddenly four odd-looking single-engined fighters dived past me. They have white bands on their wingtips. *Verdammt!* They must be Thunderbolts!'

Despite the US fighters' intervention, II./JG 11 was credited with bringing down another six Flying Fortresses, plus two of the escorting P-47s. But the *Gruppe* paid an unprecedented price for their victories – ten pilots killed or missing, plus another four wounded. The air battle for the Reich had suddenly entered a whole new dimension.

The only other Bf 109 *Gruppe* to claim against the Emden force was II./JG 3. From their new base at Amsterdam-Schiphol, the unit's eastern front veterans attacked the bombers during both their approach and withdrawal. In the light of II./JG 11's experiences closer to the target area, the *Gruppe's* first foray into Defence of the Reich operations proved remarkably successful – six B-17s downed for one



A pair of unidentified high-altitude Bf 109G-5s taxi out for another mission in defence of the homeland in the late summer of 1943

Hauptmann Anton Hackl, *Gruppenkommandeur* of III./JG 11, poses arms akimbo in front of his 'Black Double Chevron'. The seemingly odd two-tone appearance of the machine is accounted for by the fact that the area of fuselage visible between 'Toni' Hackl and Leutnant Gerhard Oppermann on his right displays JG 11's new yellow Defence of the Reich band, while the fin and rudder (on which part of Hackl's score can just be made out in the original print) are both white as befits a formation leader





pilot killed and two wounded. It should perhaps be pointed out, however, that of the 15 bombers claimed, less than half were actually lost.

On 2 October the Flying Fortresses returned to Emden, again escorted by Thunderbolts. This time the Bf 109 opposition was provided by II./JG 3 and III./JG 11. One of the latter's trio of B-17 kills was victory 127 for their new *Gruppenkommandeur*, Hauptmann Anton Hackl. Already wearing the Oak Leaves (awarded while serving with JG 77), this was 'Toni' Hackl's third Defence of the Reich Flying Fortress, the first two having been claimed during more recent operations with JG 11's *Geschwaderstab*. He would go on to add 29 more heavy bombers (including at least one daylight RAF Lancaster) to his final score of 192, ending the war as the *Geschwaderkommodore* of JG 11, and one of the Luftwaffe's leading *Viermot-Töter* (four-engined bomber killers).

The newcomers of II./JG 3 also numbered several highly decorated and high-scoring eastern front *Experten* among their ranks. One such was Hans-Joachim Kirschner, the *Kapitän* of 5. *Staffel*. His B-17 – one of four credited to the *Gruppe* on this date – took his tally to 173. Unlike Hackl, however, Kirschner would add only one more heavy bomber to his score and be killed before the year was out.

Kirschner's second, and last, B-17 was to be claimed just 48 hours after the first. On 4 October, VIII Bomber Command's Flying Fortresses targeted Frankfurt and the Saarland region. But, firstly, two groups of B-24s 'trailed their coats' in a diversionary sweep across the North Sea in another attempt to split the Luftwaffe's defences. This time it achieved the desired result. Among the units scrambled against the Liberators was II./JG 11 (plus the attached *Jasta* Helgoland, which was now on the mainland sharing the *Gruppe*'s Jever base).

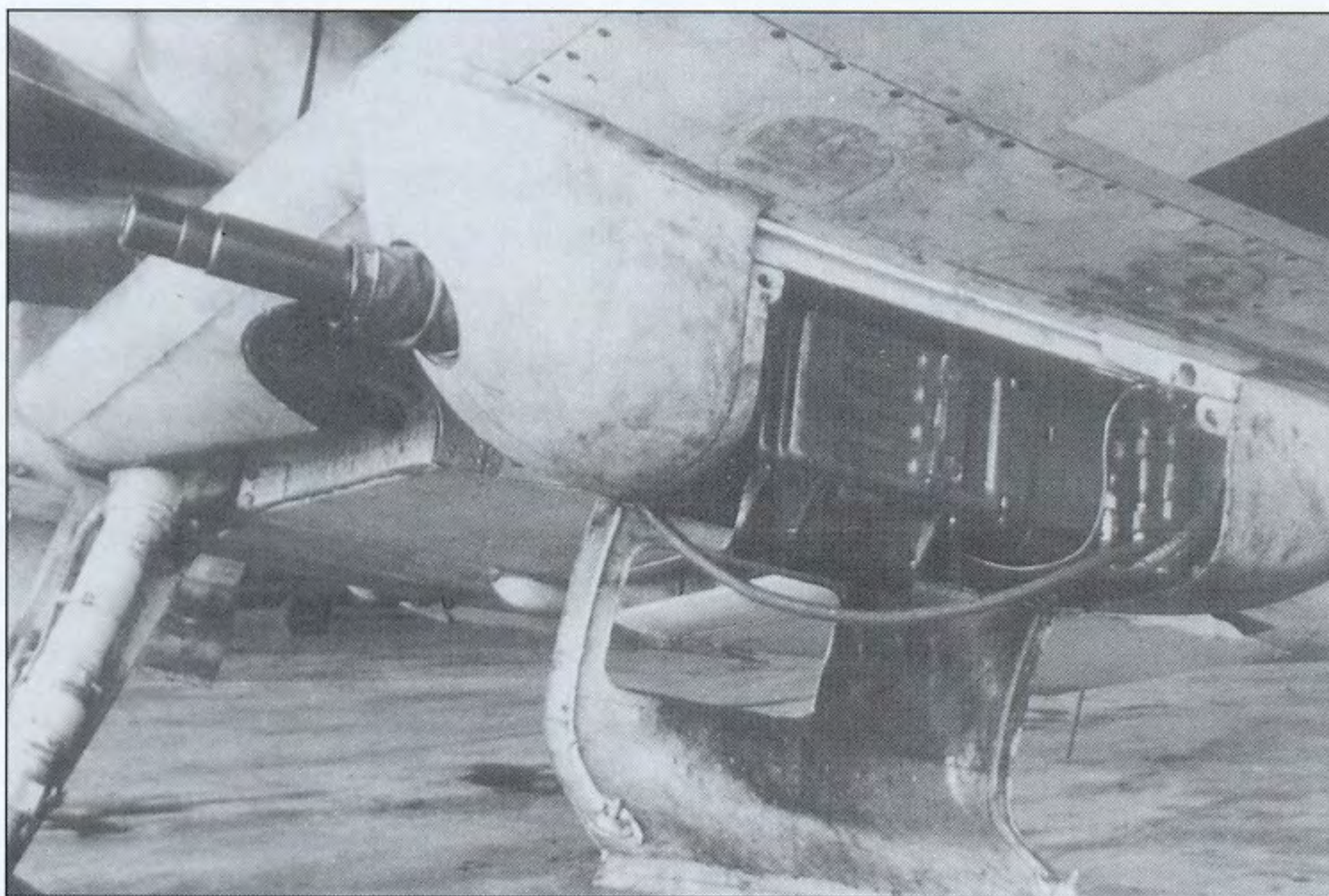
Hauptmann Specht's pilots intercepted the B-24s to the north of Heligoland. Their six claims included one apiece for Günther Specht, Heinz Knoke and Oberleutnant Hans-Heinrich Koenig, the new *Kapitän* of *Jasta* Helgoland. 5. *Staffel*'s Feldwebel Hans-Gerd Wennekers scored a double. Flying a *Gustav* armed with 30 mm cannon, he hit one of the Liberators so hard that it reared up into the machine above and both went down into the North Sea (thereby taking his heavy bomber total to five). The *Gruppe*'s six successes would have been a fair approximation of the B-24's four admitted losses, had the Fw 190 pilots not submitted claims for another five!

Meanwhile, the B-17s were heading across the Low Countries and eastern France towards their assigned targets. Things did not go entirely to plan for either attackers or defenders, however. The bomber leaders were 100 miles off course, and the Luftwaffe controllers, unable to forecast the enemy's intentions, failed to take the proper countermeasures. Only two Bf 109 *Gruppen*, II./JG 3 and II./JG 27, made contact with the Flying



Hauptmann Günther Specht on the wing of one of the many *Gustavs* he flew – a high-altitude Bf 109G-5, adorned with his own personal 'winged pencil' emblem

A 30 mm MK 108 cannon was a tight fit inside the underwing gondola of a Bf 109







The hands of Oberleutnant Joachim Kirschner, the long-serving *Staffelkapitän* of 5./JG 3, are just a blur as he re-lives and describes in vivid detail a recent action

Fortress formations, but they were prevented from carrying out effective attacks by the bombers' escorting Thunderbolts. The *Gruppen* succeeded in downing just two B-17s each, one of II./JG 3's pair being credited to Joachim Kirschner.

Frankfurt suffered severe damage in the 4 October raid. This prompted the furious local *Gauleiter* (regional political leader) to complain in person to Hitler about the Luftwaffe's 'failure' to protect the city. The Führer passed on his displeasure to *Reichsmarschall* Göring who, in turn, vented his spleen on his subordinates at a meeting of Luftwaffe leaders three days later. Charges of 'lack of aggressive spirit' and worse were levelled. Göring demanded that drastic steps be taken to improve his flyers' performance.

All Defence of the Reich fighters were to be fitted with barographs to prove that every pilot had climbed to the altitude at which the bombers usually operated, and gun-cameras to ensure that he then closed with the enemy. Serious consideration was even given to the employment of 'aerial commissars' – officers who would accompany the fighters aloft, but then stand off from the action to monitor the pilots' performance!

The upshot was a three-point 'order' sent in the *Reichsmarschall's* name to every unit involved in Defence of the Reich operations:

1: There are no weather conditions that will prevent fighter units from taking off!

2: Every fighter pilot who returns without victory and with his machine undamaged will face court-martial!

3: If a fighter pilot is short of ammunition, or if his weapons malfunction, he is to ram the enemy bomber!

Hitherto, Göring had expressed nothing but praise for his units' performance in defence of the homeland. But his decree opened up a rift between the *Reichsmarschall* and his pilots that grew ever wider, culminating in the dismissal of Adolf Galland, Göring's *General der Jagdflieger*, in January 1945 and near mutiny by many of Galland's peers.

A series of four heavy raids in the second week of October soon provided the Reich's Defence pilots with the perfect opportunity to respond to their Commander-in-Chief's ill-judged accusations. They grasped it with both hands. The four raids would cost VIII Bomber Command a total of very nearly 150 bombers. And the Bf 109 units played a major part in the defenders' success. They were credited with over 90 kills – a good 60 per cent of all victories claimed.

8 October took VIII Bomber Command back to Bremen and the nearby U-boat yards at Vegesack. It also brought them into contact with the North Sea's three 'old guard' *Gruppen* of II./JG 11, III./JG 11 and III./JG 1. Despite the presence of escorting Thunderbolts, the Bf 109s claimed a total of 11 heavy bombers.

The three *Gruppenkommandeure*, Hauptleute Specht, Hackl and Olejnik, were credited with one apiece (taking their respective scores to 18, 128 and 42). Two other familiar names among the claimants were Heinz Knoke and Hans-Gerd Wennekers, while the B-17 downed by Siegfried Zick at Talge, south of Quakenbrück, raised the latter's tally to five. Hauptmann Friedrich Eberle, the *Staffelkapitän* of 8./JG 1 who was to replace Robert Olejnik at the head of III. *Gruppe* the following day, was credited with the only P-47 kill.



I. and II./JG 3 were also involved in the action. From their base at Bönninghardt, I. *Gruppe* fell foul of the fighter escort before they could get to the bombers. Against a claim for one P-47 (by Hauptmann Detlev Rohwer, *Kapitän* of 2. *Staffel*), they lost three pilots killed or missing, plus two wounded. Up from Amsterdam-Schiphol, the pilots of Major Kurt Brändle's II./JG 3 fared much better – four B-17s, including a brace for Leutnant Franz Ruhl, and one P-47 for a single loss of their own.

Twenty-four hours after Bremen, VIII Bomber Command mounted its longest mission to date against several targets far along the Baltic coast, including Danzig and Gotenhafen (Gdynia). This would take the bombers well beyond the range of their escorting P-47s, but the US planners hoped that once they had broken through the North Sea 'crust', the unescorted 'heavies' would face little organised opposition as they headed further eastwards along the Baltic coastline. And so it proved.

Even the Bf 109 *Gruppen* of JGs 1 and 11 – despite many of their pilots going up against the enemy formations on both their outward and return flights – failed to match their previous day's total. III./JG 11, for example, claimed just one B-17. This fell to Oberleutnant Hugo Frey, the *Kapitän* of 7. *Staffel*, and was his ninth heavy bomber in as many months.

As they crossed the Schleswig-Holstein peninsula separating the North Sea from the Baltic, the bombers came under attack from an unexpected quarter. The Bf 109s of I./JG 5 had recently been transferred down from Norway for temporary deployment to Frederikshavn, in Denmark. It was from here that they took off to intercept the 'heavies', and they managed to down a B-17. South of the bombers' route III./JG 54, commanded now by ex-JG 2 Channel front veteran Hauptmann Siegfried 'Wumm' Schnell, was also scrambled to meet the raiders. Its pilots were credited with five destroyed against one of their own wounded.

On 10 October, for the third time in three days, VIII Bomber Command mounted a major mission. At one stage this raid on Münster seemed almost to surpass August's Schweinfurt action in ferocity, with reports of 30 bombers and 26 Luftwaffe fighters going down in less than 25 minutes. Although exaggerated, this gives some indication of the intensity of the battle.

Between them, the six main participating Bf 109 *Gruppen* were credited with just 12 of the 47(!) bombers claimed. The two most successful units were III./JG 1 and III./JG 26, who brought down four B-17s each. Two of the claimants were *Staffelkapitäne* – 7./JG 11's Oberleutnant Heinrich Klöpper and 12./JG 26's Hauptmann Hermann Staiger. Coincidentally, both had previously served with JG 51 on the eastern front, where each had won the Knight's Cross. The two Münster Flying Fortresses took their totals to 87 and 34 respectively.

The three consecutive raids had cost the Americans 88 admitted bomber losses (plus almost 500 damaged), but worse was to come four days later when, incredibly, they were sent back to Schweinfurt!

Despite the losses off 17 August, such was the priority placed upon the need to destroy Germany's ball-bearing production capacity that a second strike against Schweinfurt was deemed essential. Like the combined Schweinfurt/Regensburg raid before it, VIII Bomber Command's Mission No 115 of 14 October would result in the loss of exactly 60 B-17s. It would also drive the final nail into the coffin of the



Leutnant Franz Ruhl of 4./JG 3, who claimed a brace of Flying Fortresses during the Bremen raid of 8 October 1943, would himself be reported missing in action against B-17s on 24 December 1944 when the 'Battle of the Bulge' was at its height



unescorted bomber formation concept. There would be no more deep penetration raids – however vital the target to the Allied was effort – until there were enough fighters with sufficient range to escort the bombers all the way to their objective and back.

Equally aware of the importance of Schweinfurt, the Luftwaffe put everything it had into the air in its defence – single and twin-engined fighters, nightfighters, fighter-bombers, school machines and local industrial defence *Staffeln*. Amongst this motley collection were at least a dozen Bf 109 *Gruppen*. Seven of the more peripheral units (such as those of JGs 1 and 11 up on the North Sea coast) did not contribute greatly to the battle, being credited with just 11 bombers between them, and losing seven pilots in the process.

The other five *Gruppen* together claimed no fewer than 52 B-17s, out of an overall Luftwaffe total of 148! Hermann Graf's JGr 50 got six, but suffered the only fatality among the five. II./JG 27 and II./JG 51 downed nine each. I./JG 27 went one better with ten, including a double for *Gruppenkommandeur* Hauptmann Ludwig Franzisket. But the highest score of *any Gruppe* involved in second Schweinfurt was the 18 claimed by Hauptmann Walther Dahl's III./JG 3. Like Franzisket, Dahl got two, as did Wilhelm Lemke and 7. *Staffel's* Unteroffizier Wolfgang Rentsch.

It had been an undisputed victory for the defenders. After such blood-letting, it is hardly surprising that the second half of October saw just one incursion into Reich airspace. The mission to Düren on 20 October saw just two B-17s downed by II./JG 3 – one providing victory 106 for Knight's Cross-wearer Oberleutnant Werner Lucas, *Kapitän* of 4. *Staffel*. His first heavy bomber, it also proved to be his last kill before he was himself brought down by Spitfires over Holland four days later.

The Düren mission also saw the first attempted use by the Americans of British 'Oboe' pathfinding equipment (which failed), and the first escort mission to Germany by twin-engined P-38 Lightning fighters. The original Lightning groups that had arrived in the UK in the summer of 1942 had been transferred to North Africa before the Defence of the Reich campaign had begun.

By the winter of 1943 that campaign had risen to new dimensions. What had started out as almost a private war between the guardians of the German Bight and the first half-dozen US heavy bomber groups had now developed into an impersonal test of strength as hundreds of bombers, and their attendant escorts, clashed against equal numbers, or more, of defending Luftwaffe fighters. The latter had, for example, put up an estimated 800 individual sorties during second Schweinfurt.

And although VIII Bomber Command was currently restricted in its choice of targets by the range of its escorting fighters, the battle for Germany's skies was expanding not

**A new threat – B-17Gs of the Fifteenth Air Force, based in Italy, cross the Alps to attack the southern extremities of the Greater German Reich**







A bareheaded Hauptmann Karl Rammelt, *Gruppenkommandeur* of II./JG 51, is seen in deep discussion with a group of his pilots including, third from left, the Knight's Cross-wearing Oberleutnant Günther Rüberr. The reason for the gathering, which obviously required the presence of armed Luftwaffe soldiers, is unfortunately not known. No fewer than 11 of Rammelt's final total of 46 victories would be heavy bombers, the majority of them Fifteenth Air Force machines

Pictured (right) during earlier service in the Mediterranean, Hauptmann, later Major, Gerhard Michalski, *Gruppenkommandeur* of II./JG 53 from July 1942 to April 1944, is seen here demonstrating fighter tactics to a young pilot with the aid of a model Bf 109 and Spitfire. The puppy stuffed in the aircraft's tropical filter appears not in the least bit interested! Some 13 heavy bombers would be included in Michalski's end-of-war tally of 73



just numerically, but also geographically. The successful invasion of Italy by Allied ground troops meant that their air forces would not be far behind. This would inevitably lay the southern ramparts of Hitler's so-called *Festung Europa* ('European Fortress') wide open to air attack.

From their bases in North Africa the 'heavies' of XII Bomber Command had already mounted one

such assault – a double strike on 1 October against the Messerschmitt works at Augsburg, in southern Germany, and Wiener Neustadt, in Austria. It was to counter just such an eventuality that I./JG 27 had been transferred from Münster to Austria in August. Major Franzisket's *Gruppe* had intercepted the B-24s attacking Wiener Neustadt and shot down six of them (claims for a further five remained unconfirmed).

Meanwhile, III./JG 3 up from Bad Wörishofen, west of Munich, had found the B-17s of XII Bomber Command retiring from their abortive raid on Augsburg. They harried them back out across Lake Constance and, reportedly, well into Swiss airspace, claiming seven of their number.

The Luftwaffe had taken other measures to strengthen the Reich's vulnerable southern borders by withdrawing two more *Jagdgruppen* from the Italian front back to the homeland. Hauptmann Karl Rammelt's II./JG 51 had arrived at Munich-Neubiberg on 18 August – minus aircraft – to re-equip with new Bf 109G-6s. By mid-October the unit was sufficiently familiarised to participate in second Schweinfurt and claim the nine victories already mentioned. And it was two days after the Schweinfurt raid that the pilots of II./JG 53, commanded by Major Gerhard Michalski, were flown by Ju 52/3m into Wien (Vienna)-Seyring, also to receive new G-6s.

Both *Gruppen* were paraded in front of *Reichsmarschall* Göring and his entourage during the C-in-C's tour of inspection of Germany's southern defences in the latter half of October. Still smarting from the Führer's

rebuke after the raid on Frankfurt, Göring's speeches of welcome upon the units' incorporation into the Defence of the Reich organisation lacked a certain warmth. At Neubiberg Karl Rammelt's pilots were told that they would have to display 'ruthless aggression' when attacking enemy bombers, 'not like some crafty brethren who just fly around aimlessly, using up fuel and writing-off machines to no purpose whatsoever'.

II./JG 53 had been ordered from Wien-Seyring to I./JG 27's base at nearby Fels am Wagram for the



*Reichsmarschall's* inspection. Here Göring was even more blunt;

'I'm not pointing the finger at any one *Gruppe* or *Staffel* in particular, but I promise you this. I will not have cowards in my Luftwaffe – these I will root out!'

Many pilots must have wondered what they were getting into.

On 1 November the 'heavies' of XII Bomber Command were redesignated to become the nucleus of the new strategic Fifteenth Air Force. Twenty-four hours later its B-17s and B-24s launched a combined raid on the Bf 109 production plant at Wiener Neustadt. They were dealt with even more harshly than before (had the C-in-C's recent strictures been taken to heart?), this time by the *Gustavs* of I./JG 27, II./JG 51 and II./JG 53, who claimed six Flying Fortresses and 19 Liberators between them. US sources confirm the loss of six B-17s, but admit to only five B-24s. One of II./JG 53's four Flying Fortresses took *Gruppenkommandeur* Gerhard Michalski's score to 60. It was the first of 13 'heavies' he would be credited with. At the other end of the scale, exactly half of I./JG 27's 16(!) B-24s were awarded to first-time claimants.

With this raid on Wiener Neustadt, the pattern was set for the final weeks of 1943 and the first of 1944. From the UK, the Eighth Air Force – in ever-increasing numbers, but still without that essential fighter protection – would strike at familiar targets along Germany's northern coastline and across her western borders. From the south (where they would move from Africa to Italy in December), the 'heavies' of the Fifteenth Air Force would mount less frequent, but deeper penetration, raids against the Reich's 'soft underbelly'.

The campaign was now rapidly developing into a straightforward war of attrition. Given America's resources in men and *matériel*, the final outcome of any such contest was hardly in question. But it was not decided yet. Göring would continue to strip the other fighting fronts to bolster his Reich's Defence forces. And the *Jagdgruppen* protecting the homeland would continue to take a steady – at times heavy – toll of the enemy. But their own casualties were beginning to rise too, most worryingly among the experienced unit leaders.

On 3 November II./JG 3 claimed four of the P-47s escorting a raid on Wilhelmshaven. Two of them had fallen to *Gruppenkommandeur* Major Kurt Brändle. They were the first Defence of the Reich victories for the Oak Leaves-wearing Brändle, and raising his overall total to 172. That same afternoon, II./JG 3's own Amsterdam-Schiphol base came under attack from B-26 Marauders. The *Gruppe* scrambled just as the first bombs were falling. They chased the raiders back out to sea, becoming embroiled in a vicious dogfight with the medium bombers' Spitfire escort. For one RAF fighter downed, they lost five of their own – among them Kurt Brändle.



A dissatisfied *Reichsmarschall* 'welcomes' newcomers to the Defence of the Reich organisation during his tour of southern airfields in October 1943. Among his entourage are *General der Jagdflieger* Adolf Galland (third from left in leather greatcoat) and Oberst Güther Lützwow, Inspectorate of Fighters (West), who is almost entirely hidden behind his corpulent C-in-C, except for the top of his cap and the tip of his boot

Major Kurt Brändle, *Gruppenkommandeur* of II./JG 3, is seen here in pensive mood, despite the congratulatory bunch of greenery he is clutching. Brändle was another who would go down over the North Sea in late 1943





It was the *Jagdgruppen* stationed in the Low Countries – the frontline of the Reich's Defence organisation, who were not only within easy range of the 'heavies' escort fighters, but also subject to attack by the Allies' tactical air forces – that suffered some of the heaviest casualties.

During that same Wilhelmshaven raid on 3 November the three B-17s claimed by Leeuwarden-based III./JG 1, which included a pair for Oberleutnant Heinrich Klöpper, *Kapitän* of 7. *Staffel*, cost the lives of Klöpper's two fellow *Staffelkapitäne*, Hauptmann Alfred Faber of 8. and Oberleutnant Rainer Framm of 9./JG 1. The latter's predecessors, the eastern front 'turncoat saboteurs' Herwig Zuzic and Eugen Wintergerst, had both already been killed.

The Bf 109 *Jagdgruppen*'s greatest November successes were achieved during the month's three raids on Bremen. Together, they were credited with over 50 enemy aircraft destroyed (out of a total 84 admitted US bomber and fighter losses). Many of the Bight's veterans, among them Günther Specht, Siegfried Zick and Hugo Frey, added to their growing scores. The last raid of the three, on 29 November, saw II./JG 3's Leutnant Leopold 'Poldi' Münster add a brace of P-38s to the five B-17s he had already claimed in defence of the Reich. 7./JG 1's Heinrich Klöpper also got a P-38 on that date. It was his 94th victory. But during their return to Leeuwarden Klöpper and his two wingmen were killed when they dived out of low cloud at high speed straight into the ground. III./JG 1 had lost all three of its *Staffelkapitäne* in the space of a month!

Apart from the ever worsening weather, December was very much a repetition of the month before. The 'heavies' of the Fifteenth Air Force made two more incursions from the south – against Innsbruck and Augsburg, while the *Jagdgruppen* along the northern and western borders of the Reich experienced the same combination of successes and losses.

It was the losses that were to dominate the first week of December, with two more highly successful eastern front veterans falling victim to the very different kind of war they found themselves fighting in the west. Both were brought down by P-47s over the Low Countries.

On 1 December Oberleutnant Herbert Schramm, *Staffelkapitän* of 5./JG 27, was killed in action over Belgium after tangling with fighters escorting a raid on targets to the northeast of Cologne. Schramm, who had claimed just three B-17s since commencing Defence of the Reich operations, would be honoured with posthumous Oak Leaves on 1 February 1945. Three days after Schramm's loss Hauptmann Wilhelm Lemke, the ex-*Staffelkapitän* of 9./JG 3 who had been brought in to replace the fallen Kurt Brändle as *Gruppenkommandeur* of II./JG 3, was shot down by Thunderbolts west of Nijmegen, in Holland. Awarded the Oak Leaves little more than a week earlier for the 125 victories he had achieved in Russia, Lemke had since added three B-17s and three P-47s in defence of the homeland.

It was the second of two raids on Bremen, on 20 December, that again led to the Eighth Air Force's heaviest losses for some time – 33 of their aircraft failed to return. The defending Bf 109s claimed a total of 30, 11 being credited to Siegfried Schnell's III./JG 54 alone. The B-24 downed by 6./JG 27's Oberleutnant Willy Kientsch northwest of the target area was his ninth heavy bomber of the Reich campaign (he had already been credited with nine over the Mediterranean). He was



awarded the Knight's Cross on 22 November when his score was 43. Now it stood at exactly 50.

Not far away another Knight's Cross-wearing *Staffelkapitän*, Lieutenant Ernst Süss of 9./JG 11, was far less fortunate. He had just brought down one of the bombers' escorting P-38s near Oldenburg (for victory 68) when his own G-5 was hit by a second Lightning. He managed to bail out, but was allegedly shot in his parachute. Oddly, US sources indicate that the P-38s reported neither a loss nor a claim on this date.

Forty-eight hours later II./JG 11 also lost a *Staffelkapitän* when 6./JG 11's Hauptmann Egon Falkensamer was killed in action over the German-Dutch border by P-47s escorting bombers to Osnabrück. Recently returned to his *Staffel* after a six-month stint instructing, Falkensamer had two 'heavies' on his score sheet, both downed in May.

But December 1943 is worthy of mention for two other reasons. On 5 December the long-awaited P-51B Mustang made its operational debut. And on 13 December – for a combined strike against the northern ports of Bremen, Hamburg and Kiel – the Eighth Air Force, for the first time ever, put over 1000 aircraft into the air.

True, the P-51s were a group on loan from the tactical Ninth Air Force, and their mission took them only as far as France. And true, 'only' 637 bombers succeeded in attacking their primary targets on 13 December. But the writing was on the wall, and it did not bode well for 1944.

In fact, even before that, the borrowed Mustang group had already participated in all six of the last attacks to be mounted against the Reich in 1943. Due partly to the pilots' operational inexperience, however, this did not provide the immediate panacea that had – perhaps unfairly – been expected of the P-51B. Although the Mustangs claimed four kills, they lost eight of their own. The first had failed to return from the 11 December raid on Emden, the victim possibly of an attack by 9./JG 11's Oberfeldwebel Emil Schmelzinger over Holland. Four more went down during the Bremen operation on 20 December. Günther Specht and Hugo Frey of JG 11 were each credited with a P-51 on this date.

In the first week of 1944, the Eighth Air Force returned twice to Kiel, and also struck at targets in the Rhineland. Then, on 11 January, the 'heavies' set out to attack a number of aircraft factories in central Germany. And here began what one German historian has been moved to describe as 'the slaughter of the Reich's Defence fighter units'.



Ex-JG 52 eastern front veteran Oberfeldwebel Ernst Süss, seen here (left) with Major Hermann Graf, had been commissioned and appointed *Staffelkapitän* on 9./JG 11 by the time he was shot down by P-38s on 20 December 1943

This Erla-canopied Bf 109G-6 of III./JG 1, sitting on a waterlogged dispersal at Volkel early in 1944, sports the new *Geschwader* badge – a winged red '1' – introduced by recently appointed *Kommodore* Oberst Walter Oesau. Less easy to spot is the aft fuselage red Defence of the Reich band with the white III. Gruppe vertical bar superimposed





# THE TIDE TURNS

The Eighth Air Force's Mission No 182 of 11 January 1944, which saw over 650 bombers despatched against aircraft manufacturing and assembly plants at Oschersleben, Halberstadt and Brunswick, provoked the strongest Luftwaffe response since second Schweinfurt the previous October. In all, 19 single and twin-engined fighter *Gruppen*, several specialised smaller units, and elements from five nightfighter *Geschwader* were deployed against the attackers. The results were announced in an official bulletin the following day:

'136 North American aircraft, including 124 four-engined bombers, were shot down, the majority before reaching their targets.'

Although less than half the number quoted above, the Eighth Air Force's true losses of 60 downed (plus 184 damaged) were severe enough, equalling the cost of the two earlier Schweinfurt operations.

Between them, the eight Bf 109 *Jagdgruppen* in action on this day put in claims for 50 of the enemy. Although this figure is clearly over-optimistic, there is no doubt that the Bf 109s were heavily involved, with three units – the veteran II./JG 11, III./JG 11 and II./JG 27 – alone being credited with 30 victories. Several already well-known names added further to their growing scores. A Flying Fortress for 5./JG 11's Feldwebel Wennekers took his total to a round dozen. Anton Hackl, *Gruppenkommandeur* of III./JG 11, and one of his *Staffelkapitäne*, Hugo Frey (7./JG 11), each claimed a brace of B-17s, raising their respective tallies to 133 and 27. II./JG 27's ten victories included a pair each for *Gruppenkommandeur* Werner Schroer and Oberleutnant Karl-Heinz Bendert, *Kapitän* of 5. *Staffel*, taking their tallies to 95 and 47 respectively. And the B-24 downed by Oberleutnant Willy Kientsch, 6./JG 27's *Staffelkapitän*, was his 11th bomber in defence of the Reich.

Once again the Luftwaffe had dealt the Eighth Air Force an unquestionably heavy blow (although, given the numbers involved, the losses represented a casualty rate of less than ten per cent). But – and it was a big but – it had cost the defenders 32 pilots killed. That was the equivalent of an entire operational *Gruppe* lost in a single day! Taken to extremes, this meant that, in theory at least, the entire Defence of the Reich organisation could be wiped out in less than three weeks!

In reality, of course, the losses were immediately made good. But it was the start of a downward spiral from which the Reich's defenders would never recover. As their casualties climbed – which from now on they would continue to do, month by month, until the final collapse – those brought in to replace them were, in the main, either ex-bomber pilots lacking all fighter experience, or ever more inadequately-trained youngsters straight from fighter school. Inevitably, these newcomers would be even more vulnerable in combat and would, in their turn, soon need replacing. It was a vicious and accelerating circle.

And although they were in the vast majority, the tyros' names were not the only ones to appear on the casualty lists. Even those pilots who had succeeded in establishing themselves as *Experten* in the fraught arena of



the Reich's Defence operations – and they were precious few – were beginning to be picked off one by one by the juggernaut of the Eighth Air Force as the enemy's numbers grew and his tactics were refined.

One major innovation introduced by the Americans at this juncture was in the use of their fighters. Gone were the days of the pioneering P-47 escorts who grimly stayed with the bombers as long as possible before their 'short legs' forced them to turn back. Now, VIII Fighter Command had enough fighters with sufficient range – the very prerequisites stipulated earlier – to introduce 'area patrols'.

This system involved assigning groups of fighters to adjoining areas all along the bombers' route to the target. Each group was then responsible in turn for protecting the entire bomber stream as it passed through its own particular area. In addition, other fighters ranged far ahead, and to either side, of the bombers' path in order to disrupt the Luftwaffe's efforts to concentrate its forces for a concerted attack. As yet still in their infancy, these tactics, involving ever-increasing numbers of fighters, would present the defenders with near insurmountable problems in the months ahead as they tried to fight their way through to the bombers.

For the present, leaving aside the Luftwaffe's technical advances in ground-to-air communications and control, the defenders tried to respond to the enemy's inexorable build-up of strength in kind by adding to their own numbers. And a pool of experienced fighter pilots was close to hand.

Back in the summer of 1943 an ex-bomber pilot, Major Hajo Herrmann, had come up with an idea for a new form of nightfighting. The '*Wilde Sau*' ('Wild Boar') method, as it was known, employed single-engined fighters sent up, independent of radar, to search for RAF night bombers by visual means alone (see *Osprey Aircraft of the Aces 20*).

The first *Wilde Sau Geschwader*, JG 300, had been established under Herrmann's command at the end of July 1943. Initially, each of its three component *Gruppen* was 'twinned' with an existing day *Jagdgruppe*, sharing both the latter's base and aircraft (III./JG 11 at Oldenburg, for example, played host to III./JG 300). This over-utilisation proved expensive, however, and by year-end III./JG 300 had lost over 30 of III./JG 11's *Gustavs* on nocturnal operations, many of them written off in accidents.

Although not unduly high in the overall scheme of things, this attrition affected host and guest unit alike, and impaired the combat efficiency of both. It was this factor, coupled with a decline in *Wilde Sau* victories – plus, above all, the demands being made upon the daylight defenders of the Reich – that brought about a change of policy. Henceforth, JG 300's nocturnal role would be secondary (and soon cease altogether). From bases – and with machines – of its own, the unit's pilots, trained in blind-flying, would be an invaluable asset to daytime operations which, as now in the depths of winter, often had to be flown under the worst possible weather conditions.

Two more intended *Wilde Sau Geschwader* – JGs 301 and 302, each commanded by ex-Stuka pilots – which had been activated in the interim were likewise reassigned predominantly to daylight defence duties at the turn of the year. Among the three units there would subsequently be a bewildering and inexplicable series of redesignations. But the important



fact is that, with their change of role, the Defence of the Reich organisation had benefited to the tune of nine new *Jagdgruppen* at a single stroke. Six of the nine, incidentally, flew Bf 109s (the II. *Gruppe* of each *Wilde Sau Geschwader* was equipped with the Fw 190). And two had already been in action by day, I./JG 300 and I./JG 302 each having claimed a single victory during the Eighth Air Force's mission to Oschersleben on 11 January.

But for the next 18 days Germany was defended by her oldest and staunchest ally – the weather. A small force of Fifteenth Air Force B-17s attacked the Bf 109 components factory at Klagenfurt, in Austria, on 16 January, but the Eighth Air Force's intended strikes against Frankfurt of 24 January had to be aborted because of the atrocious weather conditions. Despite the weather having improved little in the meantime, the Eighth's 'heavies' tried again for Frankfurt five days later. This time they made it, but 29 of their number (plus 15 of their supporting fighters) failed to return.

One of the most successful of the defending *Jagdgruppen* on this occasion was Major Walther Dahl's III./JG 3. Its claims for 15 B-17s included another pair for the *Gruppenkommandeur*. The unit lost two of its own pilots, as did II./JG 27 up from nearby Wiesbaden-Erbenheim. One of the latter pair was the *Kapitän* of 6. *Staffel*, Oberleutnant Willy Kientsch, whose *Gustav* flew into high ground in the Hunsrück hills south of Koblenz while dogfighting in the low-level murk with P-38s. Willy Kientsch's final score of 53 included 20 heavy bombers – over half of them claimed in Defence of the Reich – which would earn him posthumous Oak Leaves.

Twenty-four hours later, still without a break in the weather, nearly 800 'heavies' were despatched against a Bf 110 production plant at Brunswick. Heavy cloud cover prevented the attack, but also greatly hampered the defenders. The eight Bf 109 *Jagdgruppen* that went up scored just seven victories between them, while losing 17 of their own pilots. I./JG 3's two fatalities occurred as a direct result of the appalling conditions when *Gruppenkommandeur* Major Klaus Quaet-Faslem and his wingman both flew into a hillside in thick cloud while trying to find a safe place to land. Göring's absurd dictum about there being 'no weather conditions that will prevent fighter units from taking off' was proving costly! The posthumous Knight's



Early morning winter sunshine casts long shadows across I./JG 27's Fels am Wagram base as an oberleutnant astride a motorcycle checks progress of work on the engine of his *Gustav*. In the background a crane mounted on a captured British six-wheeler lifts a replacement engine from its trailer

Seen in happier times and sunnier climes, Leutnant Willy Kientsch (left) enjoys a hand of *Skat* 'somewhere in the Mediterranean', where he claimed his first 41 victories. He would add another 12 – all but one of them heavy bombers – in Defence of the Reich before losing his life in the murk of a northern European winter on 29 January 1944







Hauptmann Heinrich Wurzer was JG 302's top-scoring Bf 109 *Experte*, ending the war with 25 heavy bombers (and a single P-51) to his name

Cross awarded to Major Quaet-Faslem for his 49 victories, the last three of them B-17s, almost added insult to injury.

That same 30 January saw another future Reich's Defence *Experte* open his account against the Americans. Three of the eight *Gruppen* to engage the enemy on that date were *Wilde Sau* units. I./JG 302's sole victory was a B-17 credited to Hauptmann Heinrich Wurzer, the *Kapitän* of 1. *Staffel*. It was his third kill, the first two having been RAF night bombers. The little-known Wurzer would go on to add a further 22 US 'heavies' (plus a solitary P-51) to his score over the next five months.

January ended with another strike by the Fifteenth Air Force on Klagfurt, and February opened on the third day of the month with the Eighth's returning to a very old haunt indeed – Wilhelmshaven. But the weather over the Bight was no better than that further inland, and the only three victories claimed – all for P-47s – went to III./JG 11's familiar triumvirate of Anton Hackl, Hugo Frey and Siegfried Zick. However, while remaining operational throughout, the *Gruppe* had just completed conversion on to the Fw 190. These were the trio's first kills on the new fighter, and mark their unit's disappearance from this present narrative.

JG 11's sole remaining Bf 109 *Gruppe*, Major Günther Specht's II./JG 11, would continue to fly its Messerschmitts until the end. On 10 February one of Specht's stalwarts, Oberleutnant Heinz Knoke, claimed a Flying Fortress for his 20th kill northeast of Osnabrück.

An even more famous name to claim a B-17 (his fourth in Defence of the Reich) on that same date was Oberstleutnant Hermann Graf. Since the disbandment of the quasi-experimental *Jagdgruppen* 25 and 50 back in the winter of 1943, many of their highly experienced pilots had been posted to other homeland defence units. After the briefest of stints as *Kommodore* of JG 1, Graf had replaced the long-serving Anton Mader at the head of JG 11 on 11 November.

But not even the likes of a Graf could reverse the growing trend in Reich's Defence operations of declining success rates bought at ever-higher costs. The seven Bf 109 *Gruppen* that opposed the Eighth's raid on Brunswick on that 10 February were credited with 16 victories, but suffered 14 of their own killed plus six wounded in return.

The same pattern was reflected the following day when the enemy again struck at Frankfurt. Eight Bf 109 *Gruppen* were scrambled, and they claimed eleven and lost nine. And so it would go on, with the outnumbered defenders slowly but surely losing the brutal war of attrition. But bald statistics such as these hide a wide range of individual fortunes within. On 11 February, for example, three of II./JG 3's four victories – all P-38s – had provided a treble for future eastern front Oak Leaves winner Feldwebel Gerd Thyben. IV./JG 3, on the other hand, lost their *Kommandeur* when Major Franz Beyer was killed in action south of Liège, in Belgium.

Having achieved numerical superiority – over 600 US fighters had supported the B-17 raid on Frankfurt – the enemy now produced his trump card. For 11 February also witnessed the operational debut of the Eighth's first Mustang group. True to form, this consisted of a cross-Channel sortie to the 'nursery slopes' of northern France. But before long Mustangs would be questing into the furthestmost recesses of the Reich and no corner of the Führer's domain would be immune from attack.



The heavyweight P-47 had performed sterling service, and would continue to do so right up until war's end. But it was the P-51 which undoubtedly tipped the scales in the daylight battle for Germany's skies.

That battle was not won yet, however, and on 20 February the Eighth Air Force launched Operation *Argument* – now better known as 'Big Week' – which was specially aimed at neutralising the Luftwaffe as part of the 'softening up' process prior to the Allied invasion of Normandy in the summer. A week-long series of daily heavy raids was to be mounted against Germany's airfields and aircraft manufacturing plants.

Not surprisingly, the Luftwaffe reacted fiercely to this onslaught on its own very being. But the 11 Bf 109 *Gruppen* involved on the opening day of the enemy's 'Big Week' put in a disappointing performance. They managed to claim only 15 bombers between them. Three of the fifteen were credited to one pilot, Leutnant Leopold Münster, *Staffelkapitän* of 5./JG 3, who succeeded in bringing down a trio of B-24s on their way to Brunswick.

Brunswick was again among the targets for the following day when the eight Bf 109 *Gruppen* who engaged the raiders claimed ten kills for ten losses. On 22 February, the Eighth Air Force returned yet again to aircraft factories in the Brunswick-Halberstadt area, and on this occasion the defending Bf 109s achieved 26 victories for the loss of seven of their own. Among the claimants was II./JG 11's Günther Specht, whose two kills (a P-51 and a B-17 both brought down southwest of Hannover) took his total to 30. The *Gruppe's* two other victories, a Flying Fortress apiece for Heinz Knoke and Hans-Gerd Wennekers, put them on 21 and 13 respectively.

II./JG 11's score of four was equalled by a single *Staffel*. The ex-*Jasta* Helgoland, now redesignated 11./JG 11, but still operating semi-independently and still flying its venerable, long-span Bf 109Ts, was credited with the shooting down of four B-17s. One of these was credited to the unit's *Kapitän*, Oberleutnant Herbert Christmann.

22 February also saw the Italian-based Fifteenth Air Force make its first contribution to 'Big Week' with a raid on several Messerschmitt plants around Regensburg. This strike had originally been planned for the opening day of the offensive, but had had to be aborted due to severe icing conditions at high altitude over the Alps. Among the *Gruppen* scrambled



Professor Kurt Tank (right), designer of the Fw 190, admires the scoreboard on the rudder of Major Günther Specht's *Gustav* (possibly the same high-altitude machine as that seen on page 51 marked with the 'winged pencil' emblem). One more victory added to the 30 shown here would earn Specht the Knight's Cross on 8 April 1944



against this incursion from the south were I./JG 27 at Fels am Wagram and II./JG 53 from Wien-Seyring. The defenders' kill-loss ratio was much more favourable against the smaller, less well-protected Fifteenth Air Force formations, the *Gruppen* claiming a total of 11 bombers for three pilots killed.

Among II./JG 53's successful pilots were two veteran Oberfeldwebels. Stefan Litjen's three B-17s were his first Defence of the Reich victories, and they took his overall total to 35. Herbert Rollwage, who had already been credited with two of the 15(!) P-38s claimed by the *Gruppe* in a 40-minute dogfight south of Vienna on 7 January, now added a single Liberator, which gave him his half-century.

Twenty-four hours later, with the Eighth Air Force anchored to its East Anglian bases by solid overcast, the Fifteenth struck at aircraft and ball-bearing factories at Steyr, in Austria. The defending Bf 109s reportedly had a field day, with I./JG 27 submitting claims for 16 kills and III./JG 3 – up from Leipheim – for no fewer than 20 (these totals included seven P-38s). The enemy's admitted bomber losses, all B-24s, were 17. I./JG 27's claims included a pair for Hauptmann Hans Remmer, *Kapitän* of 1. *Staffel*, taking his score to 22.

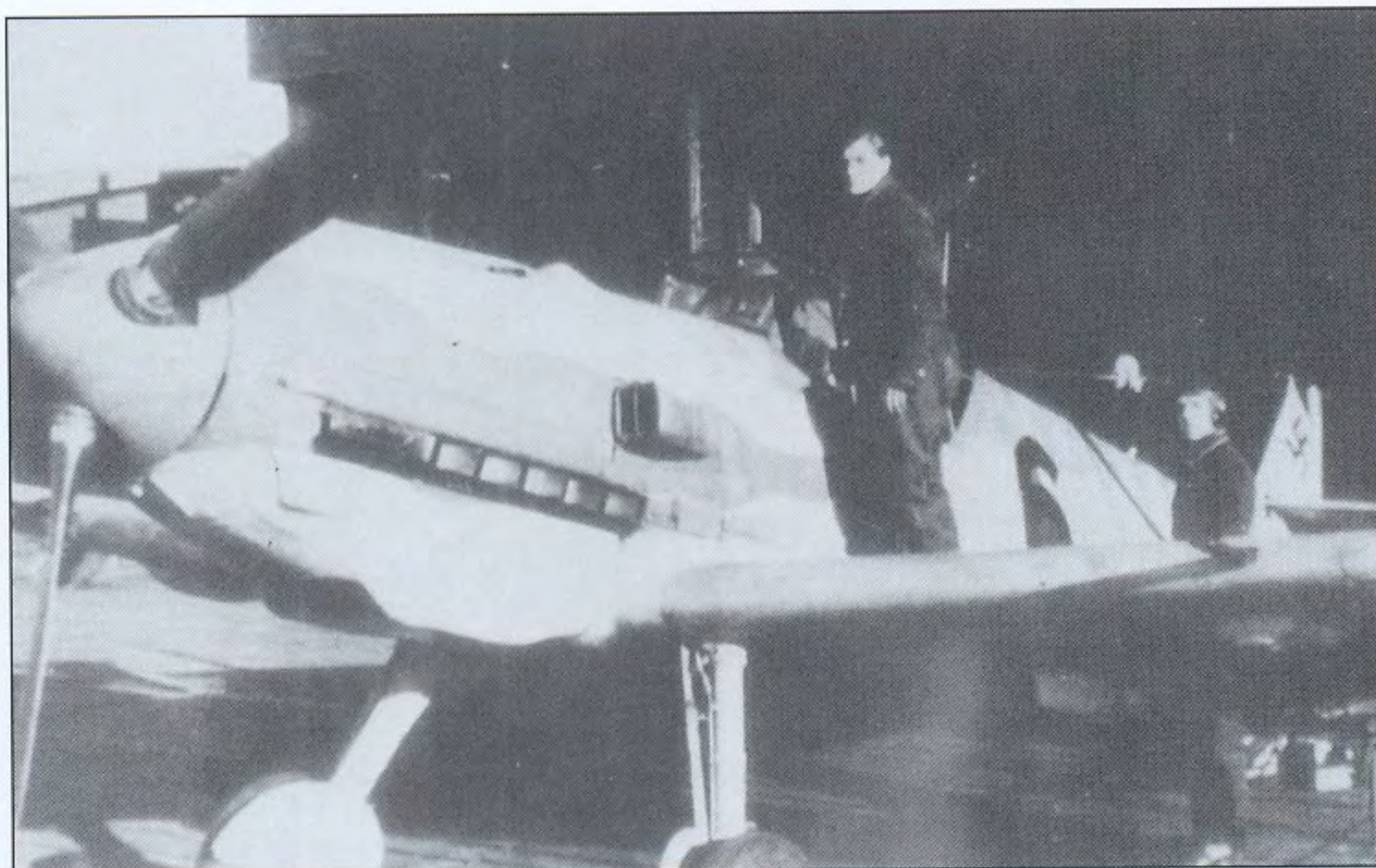
The *Gruppenkommandeur* of III./JG 3, Major Walther Dahl, likewise added a B-24 and a P-38 to his score (kills 60 and 61), while the Liberator credited to Hauptmann Emil Bitsch, *Staffelkapitän* of 8./JG 3, was not only the fourth heavy bomber of his Defence of the Reich career, but would also prove to be the last of his 108 victories.

On each of the next two days, 24 and 25 February, the Reich's aircraft industry would be attacked from both north and south. The Eighth Air Force's raids on targets in northern and central Germany on the 24th resulted in its heaviest losses of 'Big Week' with 49 bombers failing to return. The nine defending Bf 109 *Gruppen* claimed 23 kills.

To the south, where the Fifteenth Air Force struck for the second day running at Steyr, the three Bf 109 *Gruppen* that were scrambled almost equalled their northern counterparts' total. They were credited with 22 US aircraft destroyed (and for fewer losses). Two of the latter units' *Kommandeure* added to their scores, Walther Dahl claiming a brace of B-17s and a P-38 this time, and II./JG 53's Major Gerhard Michalski downing a single Flying Fortress.

On 25 February the Eighth and Fifteenth Air Forces combined forces to target aircraft plants and Luftwaffe airfields in central southern Germany. No fewer than 32 *Gruppen* – both single- and twin-engined, from as far afield as the English Channel coast to northern Italy – were sent up to oppose them. Among the 13 Defence of the Reich Bf 109 *Gruppen* to see action this day was a newcomer.

Since its brief appearance over Denmark the previous autumn, I./JG 5 had been stationed in Rumania and Bulgaria protecting the Ploesti



Oberleutnant Herbert Christmann, the last *Kapitän* of the *Jasta* Helgoland who oversaw the unit's redesignation as 11./JG 11, is seen here wearing his flying helmet and standing behind the wing of his flamboyantly decorated Bf 109T (see colour profile 22). The figure standing on the wing beside the cockpit is Christmann's mechanic in his regulation black overalls



oilfields. Now under its recently-appointed *Kommandeur*, Major Erich Gerlitz, the *Gruppe* had been returned to the homeland for re-equipment with rocket-armed Bf 109G-6s and assignment to Reich's defence duties. The unit had already claimed its first B-17 near Straubing three days earlier, but on 25 February its own airfield at Obertraubling, south of Regensburg, was on the list of targets. The *Gruppe* was able to scramble just in time to bring down three bombers, but lost two of its own pilots, including a *Staffelkapitän*.

With a number of aircraft destroyed or damaged on the ground, and their base resembling 'a moonscape, one crater next to the other', Gerlitz and his pilots were quickly transferred to Herzogenaurach – not the most auspicious of introductions to their new theatre of operations.

Thus ended (a day prematurely) 'Big Week'. The offensive had failed in one of its primary stated aims – to disrupt Germany's aircraft manufacturing capacity. Fighter production would continue to rise in the six months ahead before peaking in September. But 'Big Week' had laid waste to many of the Luftwaffe's operational airfields. And it was also responsible for the greater proportion of the Defence of the Reich's overall losses for February 1944 – 240 pilots killed and 146 wounded.

If February had been dominated by 'Big Week', then March can be encapsulated in one word – Berlin! The first three raids of the month had provided the usual mix of individual successes offset by steady losses. Among the former, the 3 March attack on Wilhelmshaven (chosen as an alternative target after the planned first ever daylight heavy bomber raid on Berlin had to be aborted due to the deteriorating weather) resulted in a Mustang each for the 'old firm' of Knoke and Wennekers.

III./JG 11's *Kommandeur*, Günther Specht, was not flying on this day, and it was Heinz Knoke who led the *Gruppe*'s 18 *Gustavs* out of the sun in a classic bounce on some 60 P-51s high over Hamburg. Twenty minutes later, and nearly 110 miles (180 km) to the southwest, one of a pair of P-38s claimed by II./JG 27 near Magdeburg left *Gruppenkommandeur* Werner Schroer just one short of his century.

On 4 March the Eighth Air Force set out again for Berlin, only to be thwarted once more by severe weather conditions. Most of the bombers turned back before reaching the Ruhr to seek targets of opportunity along the Rhine. But one combat wing of 30 B-17s, together with their Mustang escort, pressed on to drop their bombs on the southwestern outskirts of the city – the first USAAF bombers to attack the German capital. They paid for their determination by suffering a third of the day's total bomber losses. Among the *Jagdgruppen* to engage them over the target area was II./JG 3 up from nearby Gardelegen. A B-17 over Döberitz, followed by a P-51 shortly afterwards, were victories 90 and 91 for Leutnant Leopold Münster, *Kapitän* of 5. *Staffel*.

Forty-eight hours later, the Eighth's Mission No 250 of 6 March finally took it all the way to Berlin. Although the weather was still not good, nearly 700 heavy bombers attacked targets in and around the capital through breaks in the heavy cloud. Having signalled their intentions by their two previous attempts to attack the city – or 'Big B' as the American crews had already dubbed it – it is not surprising that they encountered ferocious opposition. Twenty-five fighter *Gruppen* of every type, plus a number of specialised smaller units, were hurled against the attackers,





A Flying Fortress of the 452nd BG cruises over Berlin, with aircraft just visible on the distinctive curved apron of Tempelhof airport in the top left-hand corner of the photograph. This shot was reportedly taken during the raid of 29 April 1944

Knoke, only to be hit himself by a third enemy fighter. With his machine damaged and a bullet clean through his left wrist, Wennekers bailed out. Another pilot also had to take to his parachute, and two others were killed in the engagement.

Heinz Knoke went on to claim a B-17 a quarter of an hour later (one of three credited to the *Gruppe* in the space of five minutes), but his 'Black 1' was struck by return fire and he had to force-land back at Wunstorf. Even for the veterans of II./JG 11, the Defence of the Reich campaign was becoming an almost daily struggle for existence.

The *Gefechtsverband* included another Bf 109 *Gruppe* highly experienced in homeland defence operations. Since being withdrawn from the Low Countries, III./JG 54 had been stationed at various bases in northern Germany, including Schwerin, Ludwigslust and Lüneburg. It was from Lüneburg that its 20 fighters, led by *Gruppenkommandeur* Hauptmann Rudi Sinner, took off in defence of the capital. Over the past months the *Gruppe* had extracted a steady toll of Eighth Air Force bombers and fighters (24 during 'Big Week' alone), and today was to be no exception. But it paid an unaccustomedly heavy price for its ten kills.

inflicting upon them their highest single day's loss of the entire war – 69 bombers downed and over 350 damaged. The claims by the defenders (excluding flak) were nearly double that figure. They were credited with 121 aircraft destroyed, of which the 11 participating Bf 109 *Gruppen* were responsible for 35.

From their base at Wunstorf, south of the bombers' approach route, III./JG 11 was ordered to take off and gain height over the nearby Steinhuder Lake. This was the assembly point for six *Jagdgruppen* – a mixed force of nearly 120 Fw 190s and Bf 109s in all – preparing to mount a concerted attack on the enemy formations which had just been reported crossing the Dutch border into German airspace. The *Gefechtsverband* (battle group) headed northwestwards and sighted the bombers near Quakenbrück.

Flying top cover, Günther Specht led the 15 *Gustavs* of II./JG 11 into action against a group of escorting Thunderbolts. 5./JG 11's Unteroffizier Wilhelm Fest got the first, but then the *Staffel* was in trouble. Hans-Gerd Wennekers managed to shoot another P-47 off the trail of Kapitän Oberleutnant Heinz



Rudi Sinner had taken command only days earlier. Previously the *Kommandeur* of IV./JG 54 on the eastern front, he had exchanged places with Hauptmann Siegfried Schnell at the end of February. Perhaps inexperience with the enemy in the west led him in too close as he tried to pick off a straggling B-17

south of Bremen, but he was seriously wounded by return fire and fortunate to be able to extricate himself from his wildly spinning *Gustav*.

The *Kapitän* of his 8. *Staffel*, Oberleutnant Gerhard Loos, was not so lucky. The ex-eastern front *Experte*, who had been awarded the Knight's Cross only the month before, was caught by Mustangs during a second sortie against the bombers' withdrawal some two hours later. He too managed to bail out – at 2000 ft – but accounts differ as to what happened next. His opponent reported that 'as his parachute opened the harness came apart and he fell to his death'. A German source states that, at a height of 200 ft Loos realised he was drifting into high-tension cables and deliberately chose to release his parachute harness.

III./JG 54 suffered three other pilots killed and two wounded in what was to be their last major engagement flying Bf 109s in defence of the Reich. In April, under their new *Kommandeur*, Hauptmann Werner Schroer (ex-II./JG 27), the surviving pilots transferred down to Illesheim, west of Nuremberg, to convert on to the Fw 190.

The most successful Bf 109 *Gruppe* in action on 6 March, however, was IV./JG 3, which was credited with 13 victories without loss to themselves. Also being led by a relatively new *Kommandeur* – Major Friedrich-Karl Müller, brought in from I./JG 53 in Italy to replace the fallen Franz Beyer – IV./JG 3 formed part of a second *Gefechtsverband* (including a number of twin-engined *Zerstörergruppen*) which engaged the US bombers to the east of Brunswick. The Oak Leaves-wearing Müller quickly claimed his first Defence of the Reich victories – a brace of B-17s that took his overall total to 119. Future Knight's Cross winner Leutnant Hans Weik, *Staffelkapitän* of 10./JG 3, also downed two Flying Fortresses, putting him on 19 – exactly a century behind his high-scoring *Kommandeur*.

But the most highly decorated and highest scoring pilot of all to take to the air in defence of the capital on this day was Oberstleutnant Hermann Graf, now the *Kommodore* of JG 11. Flying at the head of his *Stabsschwarm* Graf engaged a formation of B-24s to the west of Berlin. The Liberator he claimed there provided him with victory 209.

The 6 March 'Battle of Berlin' was a watershed in the Defence of the Reich campaign. Heinz Knoke himself later described it as 'the most exhausting day's fighting I ever experienced'. It had been costly too. For their (inflated) claims of 121 enemy aircraft destroyed, the defenders had paid with 36 killed and 27 wounded. And while they would never hit the Americans as hard again (although they would come close on two future occasions), their own casualty list was a stark warning of what they could expect over the months ahead as the enemy's strength and pressure grew.

Nor would the price to be paid be evenly distributed, for by now the Reich's defenders fell into three distinct categories. Most at risk were the



Tall-tailed Bf 109G-6 'gunboat' 'Yellow 9' served with 9./JG 54 in early 1944 possibly at Lüneburg. It boasts a full set of markings for this period, including a rear fuselage blue Defence of the Reich band

Oberleutnant Gerhard Loos, *Staffelkapitän* of 8./JG 54, lost his life in action against Mustangs south of Bremen during the bombers' return from Berlin on 6 March 1944







The B-17 credited to 5./JG 27's *Staffelführer* Oberleutnant Karl-Heinz Bendert on 8 March 1944 was his fifth Defence of the Reich heavy bomber victory

Mid-March 1944 at Leipheim, and the last traces of winter snow are still on the ground as III./JG 3's machines are readied for their next mission. The *Gustavs* – each now bearing JG 3's new rear fuselage white Defence of the Reich band – are sharing the tarmac with several Me 323 transports (the port wing of one of these six-engined giants can just be made out in the background at left)

youngsters, fresh out of fighter school, inadequately prepared and completely lacking in combat experience. Many did not survive their first mission. Those that did – and returned from the next three or four after that – might then begin to score. But these scores seldom reached double figures before they were brought down. These were the unsung heroes of the campaign who, by their very numbers, were responsible for by far the greater proportion of the successes – and the casualties – during its closing stages.

Next came those pilots whose units had been transferred in from other fronts. Many were highly experienced and had already amassed large scores. But that was no guarantee of survival in Defence of the Reich. Some successfully made the transition, continuing to add to their existing totals (although rarely at the same rate). Many did not.

Lastly came the *alte Hasen* ('old hares') of Reich's Defence, the veterans of the early days of the German Bight who had matured and grown in stature as the campaign itself had developed. But not even they were immune now.

There was no time for introspection, however. Just 48 hours after their first attack on Berlin, the enemy's bombers were back over the capital. The 8 March raid cost the Eighth Air Force another 37 of its 'heavies'. Many of these must have fallen to the 11 defending Bf 109 *Gruppen*, who numbered 31 *Viermots* (four-engined bombers) among their total of 40 claims. Some pilots repeated, or even improved upon, their performance of two days earlier. Hermann Graf got a Mustang (his first) near Celle.

IV./JG 3 was again credited with 13 victories, but this time at the expense of one killed and two wounded. Among those claiming were *Kommandeur* Friedrich-Karl Müller (three bombers) and Hans Weik (a B-17 and a P-51). I./JG 302's Hauptmann Heinrich Wurzer downed a pair of B-24s over Magdeburg to add to his two B-17s from the previous raid, thereby taking his rapidly lengthening Defence of the Reich bomber score sheet to nine.

Neither I./JG 3 nor II./JG 27 had been successful on 6 March. They now made good the omission with seven victories between them, but lost two pilots each. I./JG 3's experiences reflected the knife-edge nature of





the campaign at this crucial stage. The 44-victory *Kapitän* of 1. *Staffel*, Leutnant Hans Frese, was killed in action, while Oberleutnant Hans Schleef, *Kapitän* of 3./JG 3, claimed a single P-51 to take his score to 98. Meanwhile, one of II./JG 27's four B-17s had given Oberleutnant Karl-Heinz Bendert, the *Staffelkapitän* of 5./JG 27, his half-century.

The remainder of the month was marked by the growing number of casualties among the ranks of the experienced, high-scoring formation leaders – just the sort of pilots the Defence of the Reich could least afford to lose.

Exactly a week after the second attack on Berlin, III./JG 3 became entangled with a large group of P-47s escorting bombers back from a raid on Brunswick. In a furious dogfight above the Dutch border the unit lost Knight's Cross-holder Hauptmann Emil Bitsch, *Kapitän* of 8. *Staffel*. Bitsch had spent his entire operational career with III./JG 3, the last four of his 108 victories having been heavy bombers downed over the Reich. Twenty-four hours later, on 16 March, Major Erich Gerlitz, *Gruppenkommandeur* of I./JG 5, also fell victim to P-47s east of Ulm.

Two days after that III./JG 3 was again in action, with Leutnant Ekkehard Tichy, *Kapitän* of 9. *Staffel*, claiming a Mustang northwest of Stuttgart. It was Tichy's eighth Defence of the Reich kill. But when he went after a Flying Fortress minutes later his own cockpit was shattered by enemy fire. He managed to bail out of his stricken *Gustav* but lost the sight of one eye. After recuperating, Tichy volunteered for duty as a *Sturm* pilot, flying the Fw 190 (see *Osprey Aviation Elite Units* 20).

It was towards the end of the month that the Reich's Defence lost two of its most senior *Geschwaderkommodores*. Oberstleutnant Wolf-Dietrich Wilcke had headed JG 3 since the autumn of 1942. After being awarded the Swords for 155 victories at the end of that year, he had been banned from further operational flying. Although he observed the ban while in the east, six months into *Stab* JG 3's Defence of the Reich duties, its *Kommodore* was back in the air – albeit without specific official permission. A P-38 downed on 10 February had been quickly followed by three heavy bombers. On 23 March he led his *Stabsschwarm* in an attack on a formation of B-17s near Brunswick. After claiming a bomber and one of the escorting P-51s, Oberstleutnant Wilcke was set upon by the other Mustangs and was last seen going down to the southeast of the city.

Oberstleutnant Hermann Graf had likewise been banned from combat flying after reaching his double century in Russia. But he too had long been back in action in Defence of the Reich, first at the head of JGr 50 and latterly as *Kommodore* of JG 11. On 29 March Graf and his *Stabsschwarm* attacked a group of Flying Fortresses retiring south of Bremen. Oberstleutnant Graf downed one of the bombers' Mustang escorts and then rammed (or collided with?) a second. Seriously wounded, he nevertheless managed to take to his parachute, surviving to return after a long convalescence to his operational roots in the east, where he commanded his old unit, JG 52, until the final surrender.

March had also seen the addition of two more Bf 109 *Gruppen* to the Defence of the Reich order of battle. Both were used to shore up Austria's southern ramparts. Major Ernst Düllberg's III./JG 27 was brought back up from the Aegean area to Wien-Seyring, while IV./JG 27, under Hauptmann Otto Meyer, flew in to Graz-Thalerhof from Yugoslavia.

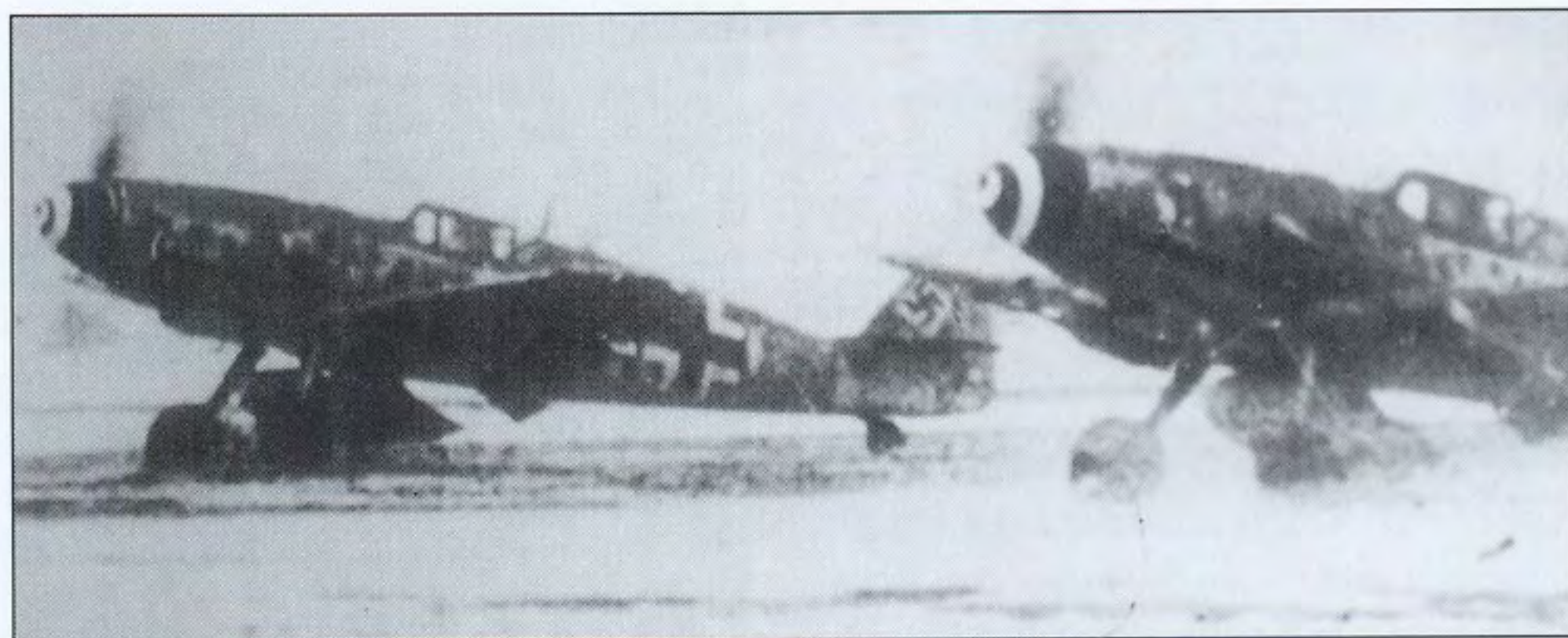


Portrayed here as an Oberfeldwebel, the later Leutnant Ekkehard Tichy claimed seven heavy bombers in defence of the homeland while serving with III./JG 3. After recuperating from severe wounds, including the loss of one eye, he would add four more as a *Sturm* pilot flying Fw 190s

Pictured earlier on the eastern front with a cigar-chomping Major Wolfgang Ewald (left), Oberstleutnant Wolf-Dietrich Wilcke of JG 3 was one of the small band of highly experienced, high-scoring *Geschwaderkommodores* to be killed on Defence of the Reich operations. Shot down by Mustangs on 23 March 1944, 'Fürst' ('Prince') Wilcke's final score of 162 kills included four heavy bombers







What a difference a few weeks make. In this still from a German newsreel shown throughout Germany in late March 1944, a pair of I./JG 27's 'gunboats' kick up slush at Fels am Wagram as they run up their engines ready for take-off . . .

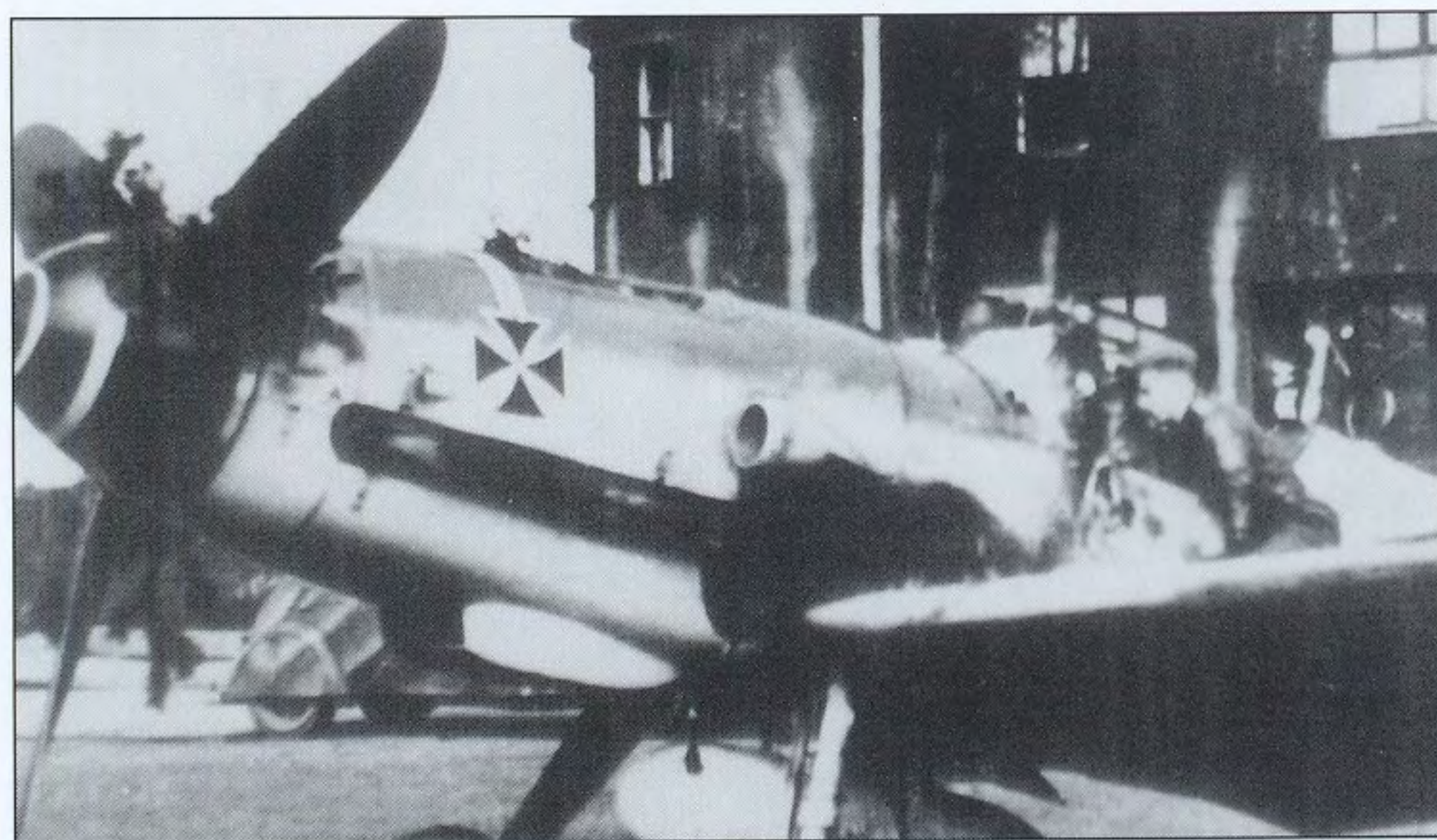
The newcomers were thus on hand to back up I./JG 27's opposition to the Fifteenth Air Force's attacks on Klagenfurt and Graz on 19 March. Between them, the three *Gruppen* claimed a slightly optimistic 25 B-24s shot down – 13 by III./JG 27 alone. The Fifteenth admitted the loss of 18 of its bombers.

Successes such as this would continue for several weeks more in the south. But the Eighth Air Force's UK-based offensive, which had begun 15 months earlier by lapping at Germany's North Sea defences, was now regularly breaching the Reich's western walls, if not yet with impunity, then certainly with ever-increasing strength and confidence. Despite the lingering bad weather, the Eighth would mount 13 attacks on the Reich in April (and the Fifteenth Air Force four). The second of them, against Luftwaffe airfields in the Brunswick area on 8 April, was opposed by a dozen Bf 109 *Gruppen* whose combined claims totalled 'only' 25 kills – 19 of them bombers. One of the B-24s lost had fallen victim to Major Friedrich-Karl Müller. It was victory 123 for Müller, and his first since replacing Wolf-Dietrich Wilcke as *Kommodore* of JG 3.

Three days later 11 of those same 12 Bf 109 *Gruppen* more than redressed the balance when they were credited with 51 enemy aircraft



. . . in fact, outside the newsreel cinemas spring had already arrived by that time. His arm resting nonchalantly on the starting handle of a I./JG 27 *Gustav*, this 'black man' (mechanic) enjoys a quiet moment in Fels am Wagram's late morning sun. Note the modified *Afrika* badge of 3./JG 27, the 'Staffel Marseille' (see *Aviation Elite Units* 12)



An unfortunately rather blurred shot of Major Günther Specht's high-altitude Bf 109G-5/AS, its spinner decorated with greenery and with a large cut-out Knight's Cross draped across its cowling in celebration of Specht's winning the award on 8 April 1944 for his 31 victories in the west. Although not apparent here, this machine sports JG 11's new *Geschwader* badge beneath the cockpit



destroyed. IV./JG 3 made the biggest contribution with claims for no fewer than 25. The 11 April strikes on aircraft factories and airfields in central and northern Germany cost the Eighth Air Force 64 'heavies'.

Among IV./JG 3's claimants was Oberleutnant Otto Wessling, *Kapitän* of 11. *Staffel*, whose trio of B-17s took his score to 80. He would add three more Flying Fortresses to his total before he was himself shot down by P-51s near Kassel on 19 April. Although he managed to crash-land and escape from his blazing *Gustav*, Wessling was strafed on the ground by the Mustangs as he sought cover. Having been awarded the Knight's Cross as an NCO on the eastern front, Otto Wessling would be honoured with posthumous Oak Leaves on 20 July.

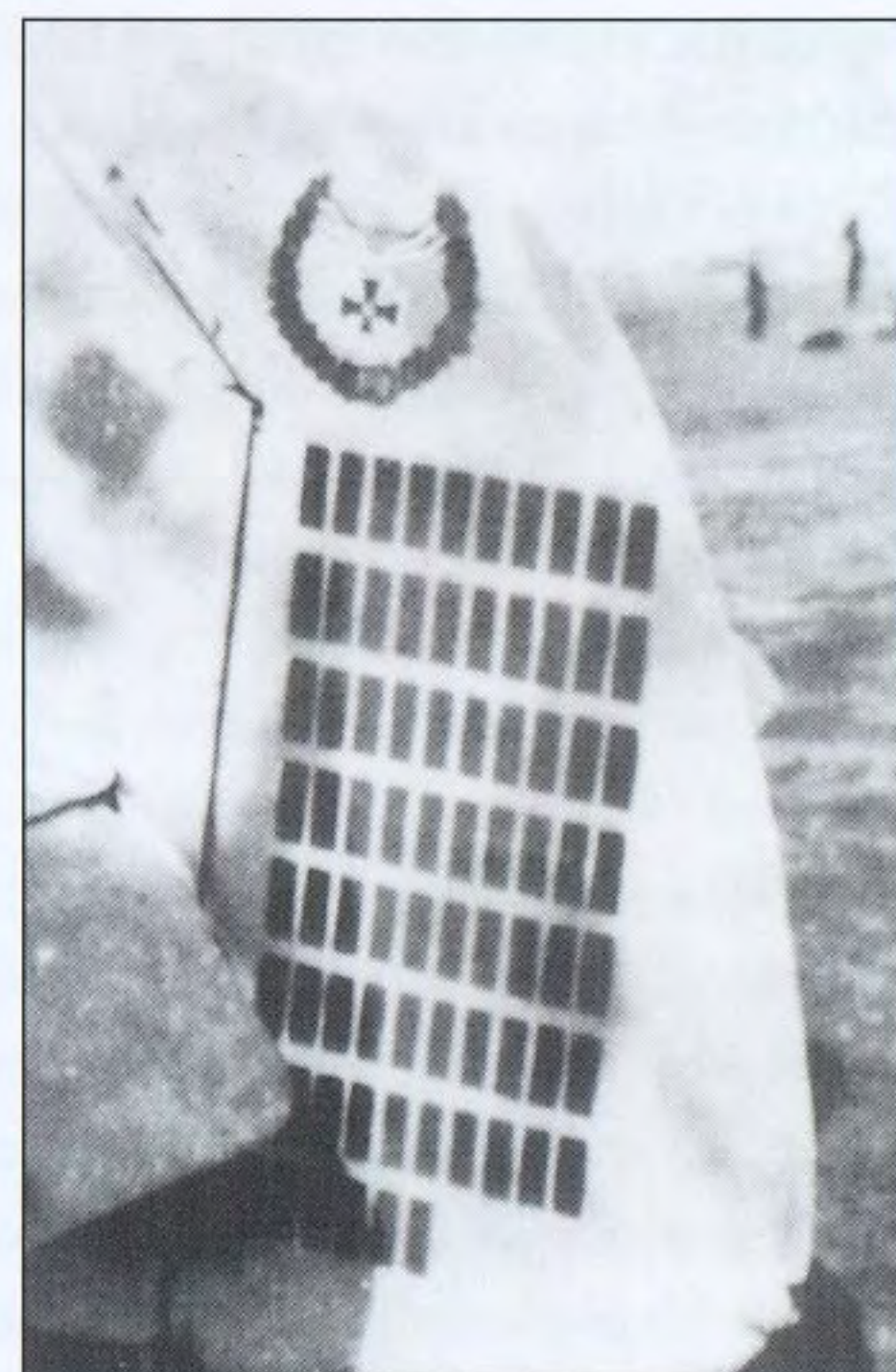
IV./JG 3 was by far the most successful Bf 109 *Gruppe* in April, having made claims for another 19 B-17s (including Wessling's last) on 18 April and a further 16 on 24 April. But on the latter date I./JG 3 also lost a *Staffelkapitän* in similar circumstances to Wessling's. Another ex-eastern front NCO who had won the Knight's Cross, Leutnant Franz Schwaiger had since risen to become *Kapitän* of I./JG 3 in place of the recently fallen Hans Frese. After an inconclusive dogfight with Mustangs to the north of Augsburg, Schwaiger made a successful belly-landing in a large open field – one source states he had run out of fuel – but then he too was attacked on the ground by strafing P-51s before he could reach cover.

Another of the 12 JG 3 pilots to be killed on 24 April was Hauptmann *Freiherr* von Kap-herr, the *Kommandeur* of III. *Gruppe*. Kap-herr, who had been in office only three days (having been transferred in from III./JG 3), was flying at the head of his new command for the first time when he was shot down over Neuburg an der Donau (Neuburg-on-Danube) close to where Schwaiger had belly-landed. He was the fourth *Kommandeur* of III./JG 3 to be killed since the *Gruppe* had commenced Defence of the Reich operations.

On 29 April the Eighth Air Force's Mission No 327 took it back to Berlin. Sixty-three of its bombers would fail to return (the last time in the war that the 'Mighty Eighth' would suffer 60+ combat casualties in a single day). IV./JG 3, now commanded by Major Wilhelm Moritz, was again in the thick of the action, and the most successful, with claims for 14 bombers against a single fatality of its own. II./JG 11 was also back in the fray after having spent the past few weeks re-equipping with a special high-altitude variant of the Bf 109. But despite a dozen kills, this was not the II./JG 11 of old. It not only had new aircraft, but many new pilots – mostly green youngsters – and a new *Gruppenkommandeur*.

With Günther Specht about to take over as *Kommodore* of JG 11 in place of the wounded Hermann Graf, Major Günther Rall of JG 52 was brought in from the eastern front to head II./JG 11. Wearing the Swords, Rall was the third-highest scoring fighter pilot in the entire Luftwaffe. Although almost all of his operational career to date had been against the Red Air Force at low to medium level, the new *Kommandeur* now claimed his first Defence of the Reich kill – a P-38 to the north of Hannover, at an altitude of 26,000 ft. It was victory 274 for Rall.

Another of the *Gruppe*'s 12 claimants was Oberleutnant Heinz Knoke, who downed a P-51, only to fall foul of a group of Thunderbolts himself shortly afterwards. He survived a nasty crash landing near Brunswick, but a fractured skull would keep him off flying for nearly four months. Knoke



Although a complete novice in Defence of the Reich when compared to Günther Specht, IV./JG 27's top scorer, Feldwebel Heinrich Bartels, had 73 victories to his credit when the *Gruppe* flew in to Graz-Thalerhof from the Aegean at the end of March 1944. Bartels had already added several more kills by the time this shot of his rudder tally was taken the following month. His final score of 99 included 26 in defence of the homeland – all fighters – before he himself fell victim to P-47s on 23 December 1944



would assume command of III./JG 1 in August, but then sustained further injuries a few weeks later.

The Eighth Air Force returned to Berlin on 7 and 8 May, and the defending Bf 109 *Gruppen* again suffered varied fortunes. On the latter date IV./JG 3 was credited with an astonishing 24 heavy bombers (although a third of these had been downed by the Fw 190s of the newly attached 11. *Staffel*). The *Gruppe's* most successful pilots, *Kommandeur* Wilhelm Moritz and Hans Weik, the *Kapitän* of 10./JG 3, added a double and a treble respectively to their existing scores, bringing them to 37 and 31.

II./JG 3's more modest nine victories cost it two killed, one of them the *Gruppe's* top scorer. Leutnant Leopold Münster had already claimed a B-17 west of Brunswick before going after a formation of B-24s sighted over Hildesheim. But the highly experienced *Kapitän* of 5. *Staffel* must have misjudged his pass for he collided with his chosen victim. The Liberator exploded in mid-air, sending its assailant down too. 'Poldi' Münster was another who would be awarded posthumous Oak Leaves (on 12 May). His final score totalled 95, with the last 19 having been claimed in Defence of the Reich – all but four of them heavy bombers.

On 10 May the Fifteenth Air Force put in its first appearance of the month over the Reich. Between them, IV./JG 27 and II./JG 302 were credited with 13 of the enemy, who were attacking targets in the Wiener Neustadt area. Among II./JG 302's seven victories was a pair of B-24s for Hauptmann Heinrich Wurzer.

The next day another *Geschwaderkommodore* was lost. With service dating back to before the Spanish civil war, where he had scored his first eight kills as a member of the *Legion Condor*, Oberst Walter Oesau had since risen to become one of the Luftwaffe's foremost aces. He had been *Kommodore* of JG 2 on the Channel coast for almost two years. Then, after a brief period of office as *Jafü Bretagne* (Fighter-Leader Brittany), he had been appointed *Kommodore* of JG 1 on 12 November 1943.

Putting his Channel front experience to good use, 'Gulle' Oesau had claimed nine heavy bombers while leading JG 1, the last of them being brought down during the 6 March 'Battle of Berlin'. But on 11 May 1944 it was Oberst Oesau who was to fall, downed by P-38s at the end of a vicious 20-minute dogfight as he tried to belly-land his damaged *Gustav* near the Belgian town of St Vith. In his honour, the *Geschwader* was subsequently awarded the official title JG 1 'Oesau'.

Oesau's loss may have been a bitter blow, but it was the raids launched by the Eighth Air Force 24 hours later that heralded the beginning of the end for the defenders of the Reich. Mission No 353 of 12 May saw nearly 900 bombers sent to bomb six major oil refineries – five in eastern Germany and one in Czechoslovakia. This first attack by



Another 'near centurion', Leutnant Leopold Münster of II./JG 3 claimed 15 'heavies' destroyed in his tally of 19 Defence of the Reich victories. His last bomber (kill 95 overall) cost 'Poldi' Münster his own life when he collided with the B-24 southeast of Hildesheim on 8 May 1944

Another high-ranking *Geschwaderkommodore* to fall victim to US fighters while defending the homeland was Oberst Walter Oesau of JG 1. Seen here (left) on the Channel front with Hauptmann Siegfried Schnell, Oesau was flying 'Green 13' when he was downed by P-38s near St Vith, in the Ardennes, on 11 May 1944





the Eighth on the Reich's oil industry had long been feared by Germany's military and industrial leaders alike. And with good reason. What 'Big Week' had signally failed to do – curb Luftwaffe operations by targeting aircraft manufacturing plants and airfields – the sustained oil offensive that was now beginning would achieve beyond all expectations. Luftwaffe activity would not merely be curbed, it would be crippled.

Fighter production was still rising, and the schools were still turning out enough pilots to fly the machines being produced, after a fashion. But the rapidly worsening fuel situation, which in the months ahead would go from critical to catastrophic, soon rendered all such efforts meaningless.

The defenders reacted violently to this initial assault on their lifeblood. The 11 Bf 109 *Gruppen* sent up in opposition claimed a total of 89 aircraft destroyed (nearly double actual US losses). Several experienced formation leaders added to their already considerable scores. A brace of B-17s downed within five minutes took Major Friedrich-Karl Müller, *Kommodore* of JG 3, to 140. Major Günther Rall led his high-altitude II./JG 11 down on to a large formation of P-47s and claimed one of them, before he and all three other members of his *Stabsschwarm* were shot down in the dogfight that followed. Rall bailed out, but his left thumb had been severed. He was phlegmatic about his injury – 'Who needs two thumbs anyway?' – but although he would be appointed *Kommodore* of JG 300 in the closing days of the war, the P-47 downed over Nassau had been the last of Günther Rall's 275 victories.

Another *Gruppenkommandeur* wounded on this date was I./JG 27's Major Ludwig Franzisket, who was hit by return fire from a B-17 he was attacking near Frankfurt-on-Main. At least two experienced *Staffelkapitäne* were killed. Hauptmann Gerhard Sommer of 4./JG 11 was brought down by US fighters south of Bielefeld.

Having been on Defence of the Reich operations from the outset, 15 of Sommer's 20 victories had been heavy bombers, making him one of the campaign's foremost *Viermot-Töter* (four-engined bomber killers). He would be awarded a posthumous Knight's Cross on 19 August. Further to the south, Leutnant Jürgen Hoerschelmann, *Kapitän* of 7./JG 3, fell prey to Mustangs near Fulda. The few remaining *Experten* engaged in homeland defence were getting steadily fewer!

A revealing indication as to the make up of the Reich's Defence strength by this stage of the hostilities is provided by the two most successful *Gruppen* in action on 12 May. Of II./JG 3's 12 claims, all but one were made by pilots with three victories or fewer. And 16 of the 20 kills credited to IV./JG 3 went to pilots with scores in single figures. In fact, this was to be one of IV./JG 3's last major successes flying Bf 109s in Defence of the Reich.

Having operated for the last two months in conjunction with *Sturmstaffel* 1 (the experimental Fw 190 unit now incorporated into the *Gruppe* as 11./JG 3), and no doubt influenced in no small measure by their consistently high scores of late, Maj Wilhelm Moritz's IV./JG 3 was the first *Jagdgruppe* to be selected for the specialist *Sturm* role. Before the month was out it had converted onto heavily armed and armoured Fw 190s (see *Osprey Aviation Elite Units* 20).

Meanwhile, the Bf 109 *Gruppen* soldiered on. Against a series of four US raids in the middle weeks of May, their (mainly young) pilots claimed



The operational career of Hauptmann Ernst Boerngen, *Gruppenkommandeur* of I./JG 27, came to an end when he rammed a Liberator – his 24th heavy bomber victory – near Helmstedt on 19 May 1944

Oberstleutnant Theodor Weissenberger of 7./JG 5 indicates victory 112 – an Airacobra of the Red Air Force, downed on 25 July 1943 – that won him the Oak Leaves while serving on the Arctic front. He would later head I./JG 5 in Normandy and Defence of the Reich, before converting to the Me 262 in November 1944



Fifteenth Air Force incursion up from Italy. It claimed a dozen of the raiders attacking airfields in Austria. I./JG 302 went one better, being credited with 13 enemy aircraft brought down to the south and west of

a total of 69 kills. The biggest success of any one day was the eight victories credited to I./JG 27 in the Brunswick area on 19 May. These included a pair of B-24s for Hauptmann Ernst Boerngen, who had succeeded the wounded Ludwig Franzisket as *Kommandeur* just six days earlier. Boerngen's first victim was brought down by cannon fire and the second he rammed. Bailing out with severe wounds, Boerngen was rushed to hospital, but surgeons were unable to save his right arm.

On 24 May I./JG 27 (whose pilots seemed to be waging their own personal two-front war!) was back in action against the next Fifteenth Air Force incursion up from Italy. It claimed a dozen of the raiders attacking airfields in Austria. I./JG 302 went one better, being credited with 13 enemy aircraft brought down to the south and west of Vienna. Eight of the thirteen consisted of doubles, including another brace of B-24s for Heinrich Wurzer.

But it was the Eighth Air Force that was doing the damage. Mission No 373 of 27 May, aimed at marshalling yards in western Germany, was the first time it had despatched more than 1000 bombers against the Reich. And although this gave veteran NCO, and recent Knight's Cross winner, Oberfeldwebel Herbert Rollwage of II./JG 53 the opportunity to claim his 11th Defence of the Reich heavy bomber, it also cost the Herzogenaurach-based I./JG 5 seven killed and five wounded. Among the former was the *Gruppenkommandeur*. After attacking a formation of bombers heading back across the French border, Major Horst Carganico lost his life when he attempted to force-land his damaged *Gustav* and crashed into high-tension cables.

Horst Carganico had been in command of I./JG 5 for only two months. Prior to that he had been the long-serving *Kommandeur* of II./JG 5 in the Arctic. And it was this





unit, led now by the Oak Leaves-wearing Oberleutnant Theodor Weissenberger, that was to be the last complete *Gruppe* to be added to the Defence of the Reich's order of battle. After a brief stop-over in the Baltic states (where Weissenberger had downed a trio of Soviet fighters on 18 May to take his total to 175), II./JG 5 would arrive at Gardelegen, northwest of Brunswick, at the end of the month.

In the meantime, the Eighth Air Force had struck twice more at the Reich's oil. On 28 May the defending Bf 109s were credited with 33 enemy aircraft destroyed, 13 by III./JG 27 alone. The following day their combined total was just 20, with II. and III./JG 3 claiming six and seven respectively. As was the norm by now, most of these victories went to single-figure pilots, one of the few exceptions being the B-24 brought down near Pölitz on the 29th by Leutnant Hans Grünberg of 5./JG 3. This was Grünberg's seventh Reich's Defence bomber. It took his overall total to 70, for which he would subsequently receive the Knight's Cross on 8 July.

But 29 May was overshadowed by the loss of yet another veteran *Geschwaderkommodore*. Since taking over JG 3 from Wolf-Dietrich Wilcke two months earlier, Major Friedrich-Karl Müller had claimed 18 Defence of the Reich victories, all but one of them heavy bombers. Having been operational without a break since the beginning of the war (his first eight victories had been gained with III./JG 53 during the Battle of France), it has been suggested that complete exhaustion – exacerbated by his recent command responsibilities – was a contributing factor to 'Tutti' Müller's losing control of his machine and crashing upon landing back at Salzwedel after aborting this day's mission.

29 May also saw the Fifteenth Air Force return to Wiener Neustadt. The Bf 109 opposition, which included *Stab*, I., III. and IV./JG 27 and I./JG 302, downed 23 enemy aircraft between them. I./JG 302 got seven (only one B-24 for Heinrich Wurzer this time). Of the other claimants, the *Kommodore* of JG 27, Oberstleutnant Gustav Rödel, and two of his *Gruppenkommandeure*, Major Wolfgang Redlich (I.) and Major Ernst Düllberg (III.), were each credited with a B-24 apiece (taking their individual totals to 94, 37 and 33 respectively).

But perhaps the highest scorer in action against the Fifteenth Air Force on this date was the Oak Leaves-wearing Leutnant Ernst-Wilhelm Reinert, ex-JG 77 and now *Staffelkapitän* of 12./JG 27. The P-51 he downed near St Pölten – the second of his new Defence of the Reich career – provided Reinert with victory 168.

Although the *Experten* in the south were still adding to their totals, there was a price to pay here too. After claiming his B-24, Wolfgang Redlich had himself been hit by fire from the other bombers in the formation. Like Reinert's Mustang above, Redlich's *Gustav* crashed not



Seen here (left) as a *Fahnenjunker-Oberfeldwebel* (NCO Officer Candidate) during II./JG 3's early days in Defence of the Reich, Leutnant Hans Grünberg had replaced the fallen Leopold Münster as *Staffelkapitän* of 5./JG 3 on 9 May 1944. His 21 victories in the west included 14 heavy bombers before he too, like Weissenberger above, transitioned onto the Me 262 in November 1944

Another *Geschwaderkommodore* to lose his life in defence of the homeland was Wolf-Dietrich Wilcke's successor at the head of JG 3, Major Friedrich-Karl Müller. Some sources have suggested that complete physical and mental exhaustion contributed in no small measure to his fatal crash at Salzwedel on 29 May 1944





Shown wearing the Oak Leaves awarded for his 103 victories on the eastern front as a Feldwebel with JG 77 in 1942, Hauptmann Ernst-Wilhelm Reinert rose to become IV./JG 27's final *Kommandeur* of the war, and one of only two pilots to win the Swords while flying Bf 109s in the Defence of the Reich

Having spent two-and-a-half years on General Staff and training duties since his earlier service with I./JG 27 in North Africa, Major Wolfgang Redlich's 11-day stint as the unit's *Gruppenkommandeur* in May 1944 netted him just one heavy bomber to add to his 36 victories of 1940-41

Hauptmann Karl-Heinz Langer, *Kommandeur* of III./JG 3, claimed two of the seven B-17s credited to his *Gruppe* on 30 May 1944. Subsequently promoted to Major (as seen here in April 1945), Karl-Heinz Langer's final Defence of the Reich total numbered ten – four of them heavy bombers



the Reich, this time targeting marshalling yards. The pressure, it seemed, was both relentless and unremitting.

But then – suddenly – the skies of Germany were empty of USAAF heavy bomber streams, and their ever present fighter escorts.

far from St Pölten, west of Vienna. Major Redlich was the third *Gruppenkommandeur* to be lost by I./JG 27 in little more than a fortnight.

On 30 May the Reich was again subject to a combined assault from both north and south, the Eighth Air Force targeting aircraft plants and depots in central Germany and the Fifteenth aiming for one last knock-out blow against the Wiener Neustadt complex. The performance of the Bf 109 *Gruppen* opposing these strikes was not overly impressive, the only exception being Hauptmann Karl-Heinz Langer's III./JG 3, whose seven claims – all for B-17s attacking the Junkers aircraft and engine plant at Dessau – accounted for a third of the day's Bf 109 victories.

Part of III./JG 3's success may have been due to II./JG 11, whose pilots were performing their usual role as top cover on this day, claiming three P-51s in the Dessau-Magdeburg area in the process. Two of the Mustangs were credited to II./JG 11's new *Kommandeur*. Another ex-JG 52 eastern front veteran, Oberleutnant Walter Krupinski had recently been awarded the Oak Leaves (for his 177 victories against the Red Air Force) before being posted to Defence of the Reich duties. Having served briefly as *Staffelkapitän* of I./JG 5, Krupinski had now replaced the wounded Günther Rall at the head of II./JG 11. The two Mustangs had raised his total to 190. In complete contrast – and much more typical of the times – the other P-51 credited to the *Gruppe* was a first for Unteroffizier Karl Keil.

On the following day, 31 May, the Eighth Air Force was back over



# THE LAST ACT

**D**uring the late spring and early summer on 1944, the Eighth Air Force had been dividing its time and energies between the Reich and targets in northwestern occupied Europe. But in the first week of June the US bombers were to concentrate solely on cross-Channel strikes as part of the final run-up to the Allied invasion of Normandy. The Luftwaffe had contingency plans in place to counter this long-awaited event. They included the immediate despatch of almost every single Reich's Defence *Jagdgruppe* to the threatened area to reinforce the resident JGs 2 and 26.

Thus, in the space of a few hours in the aftermath of the Normandy landings of 6 June, the carefully structured edifice of the Defence of the Reich organisation – so painstakingly put together over the course of the past 18 months – was torn apart.

More used to heavy bombers at high altitude, the *Gruppen* sent to France suffered appalling casualties in medium to low-level operations against the invading forces. As summer turned to autumn, the survivors would be withdrawn to the homeland. Here, their losses were made good, and most *Gruppen* would then return to Defence of the Reich duties at near full strength in terms of men and equipment.

But those duties bore little resemblance to the Reich's Defence of old. Each *Gruppe* was now four *Staffeln* strong (the majority having been reinforced by additional *Staffeln* culled from the ranks of the *Jagdgruppen* operating on the eastern front). And in an attempt to preserve his few remaining experienced formation leaders, *Reichsmarschall* Göring had laid down specific criteria for their protection. A *Staffelkapitän* could only fly a sortie if accompanied by at least five other aircraft. A *Gruppenkommandeur* needed at least 15 friendly fighters with him in order to participate in a combat mission, and a *Geschwaderkommodore* required a force of 44 before he could be risked operationally!

The biggest change of all, however, was in the nature of the enemy. As they withdrew from France back to the homeland, the depleted *Jagdgruppen* had been harried all the way by aircraft of the Allied tactical air forces, which had, by this time, gained a firm foothold on the continent. Defence of the Reich was thus no longer just a straightforward battle against high-flying US bomber formations (as well as increasingly frequent daylight incursions by the 'heavies' of RAF Bomber Command). The homeland now also had to be defended against medium bomber raids and the hordes of enemy fighter-bombers that were beginning to roam almost at will over her western provinces.

The Luftwaffe leadership tried to draw a distinction between these two forms of enemy onslaught. Those *Jagdgruppen* opposing the Allies' tactical air forces would be placed under the direct control of *Luftwaffenkommando West* (the redesignated *Luftflotte 3* – the command previously responsible for all units in France and the Low Countries prior to the recent retreat). The *Gruppen* engaged in the strategic defence of the homeland would remain, as before, part of *Luftflotte Reich*.



Such administrative niceties had little relevance in the confusion of day-by-day operations, however. Tactical units would be ordered up against high-altitude bomber formations as and when the occasion demanded, and the strategic *Gruppen* would often find themselves committed to action against medium level bombers and fighter-bombers in defence of their own bases or other nearby targets.

Every *Jagdgeschwader* engaged in defending the homeland – whether officially part of *Lw.Kdo. West* or *Lfl.Reich* – was therefore allotted its own distinctive coloured fuselage markings, the so-called ‘Reich’s Defence Bands’, to aid recognition in the air. For further details of Bf 109 operations in Normandy and during the months that followed see *Osprey Aircraft of the Aces* 29.

But to return to the first week of June 1944, and those empty skies over Germany. With the vast bulk of the Reich’s Defence units having decamped westwards, the onus of protecting the homeland was resting almost entirely on the shoulders of two of the ex-*Wilde Sau* *Geschwader* – JGs 300 and 302 (JG 301’s *Gruppen* were currently divided between Normandy (I.) and the defence of Rumania and Bulgaria).

Unaffected by the historic battle of the Normandy beachheads in the north – now in its fourth day – the first US heavy bombers to reappear over the Reich were those of the Fifteenth Air Force flying up from Italy. On 9 June nearly 500 B-17s and B-24s attacked targets in the Munich area. The defending I./JG 302 claimed 16 Liberators, and a single P-51, without loss to themselves.

2. *Staffel*’s Oberfeldwebel Artur Gross was credited with a trio of B-24s. Four other pilots got doubles. Among the latter was Heinrich Wurzer, whose two B-24s downed south of Landshut took his daylight bomber total to 19. Another of the four was Oberfeldwebel Anton Benning. An ex-transport pilot (who had flown supplies into beleaguered Stalingrad) before joining *Wilde Sau*, Benning ended the war as a lieutenant with the Knight’s Cross and seven daylight heavy bombers among his final total of 14.

While operations in the south would continue to take a regular, if declining, toll of Fifteenth Air Force machines – I./JG 302, for example, was never able to repeat its performance of 9 June – it was to be a very different story in the north when the Eighth Air Force, relieved of its immediate commitments over Normandy, resumed its attacks on the Reich.

The first of these took place on 18 June when over 1200 bombers flew in across an eerily quiet North Sea, where once they would have faced the combined opposition of JGs 1 and 11, to attack oil and other targets in northwest Germany.

Forty-eight hours later a similar number of bombers mounted major strikes on oil installations further inland. The two defending Bf 109 *Gruppen*, I. and III./JG 300 were virtually powerless against such

Pictured in tropical uniform and wearing the Knight’s Cross he won as a bomber pilot in 1942, Hauptmann Iro Ilk (left) later commanded III./JG 300 in both *Wilde Sau* and daylight Defence of the Reich operations. He was shot down and killed by RAF Spitfires near Duisburg on 25 September 1944





overwhelming force. III./JG 300 was vectored northwards from its Jüterborg base against a large formation of B-24s over the Baltic coast. Although the 2nd Bomb Division lost 34 of its Liberators on this date (18 of which sought sanctuary in neutral Sweden), much of the damage they suffered was reportedly inflicted by twin-engined, rocket-firing Me 410s. III./JG 300 lost five dead and an equal number wounded. *Gruppenkommandeur* Hauptmann Iro Ilk – who had won his Knight's Cross as a bomber pilot in 1942 – was among the latter, being forced to bail out west of Anklam.

And so it would go on for the remainder of the month, with the Eighth Air Force targeting the Reich's oil on three more occasions, and the two *Gruppen* sustaining further losses for very little return. The only 'success' as far as Bf 109 operations was concerned (and serving to highlight yet again the very different conditions existing on the Reich's northern and southern flanks) was I./JG 302's bringing down seven B-24s and a trio of P-51s out of the Fifteenth Air Force formations – altogether nearly 1000 strong – attacking oil installations near Vienna on 26 June. But even this was little more than a pinprick, and had cost the *Gruppe* three killed.

At the end of June the first *Gruppe* to be returned from Normandy resumed Defence of the Reich operations. II./JG 5's sojourn in the west had been brief, and it had suffered fairly low casualty figures by invasion front standards – eight killed or missing, plus one wounded. Also supplementing the homeland's order of battle in July were II./JG 27, newly re-equipped with high-altitude Bf 109G-6/AS fighters, and III./JG 53, recently flown in from Italy.

But the veterans among these latest additions were too few to halt the downward spiral of the Bf 109s' declining fortunes. The post-Normandy Defence of the Reich campaign would be built around the three new Fw 190-equipped *Sturmgruppen*. Each of these would form the nucleus of a *Gefechtsverband* (battle group), with Bf 109 units being used primarily as escorts and top cover for the armoured Focke-Wulfs. The *Sturmgruppen*'s task was to find and attack the US bomber formations. The Bf 109s' function was to protect them against enemy fighters while they did so.

Just what this division of labour meant in practice was vividly demonstrated on 18 July when more than 500 bombers of the Fifteenth Air Force specifically targeted one of the *Sturmgruppen*'s own airfields at Memmingen, in southern Germany. The Focke-Wulfs claimed a staggering 47 heavy bombers. The Bf 109s of I./JG 300 downed two P-51s, those of II./JG 27 got one and III./JG 300 none at all – at a combined cost of nine pilots killed and five wounded!

On the following day, 19 July, both the Eighth and Fifteenth Air Forces were despatched against targets in the southwest of Germany and Munich areas. The two attacks, some 90 minutes apart, were carried out by close on 1500 heavily escorted bombers. The five opposing Bf 109 *Gruppen* were credited with a total of 14 enemy bombers and two fighters. The most successful was again I./JG 302, whose score of ten Flying Fortresses was higher than that of either of the two *Sturmgruppen* involved on this date.

One of the ten B-17s had been claimed by I./JG 302's Unteroffizier Willi Reschke. It was his third daylight Defence of the Reich heavy



Another ex-bomber pilot Knight's Cross recipient, Hauptmann (later Major) Gerhard Stamp was *Gruppenkommandeur* of I./JG 300, whose high-altitude Bf 109s provided top cover for the *Geschwader's* II.(*Sturm*) *Gruppe* during homeland defence. Stamp's own victories included at least four heavy bombers (two by night). In November 1944 he set up the Me 262-equipped *Sonderkommando* Stamp to investigate air-to-air bombing techniques (shades of Heinz Knoke!)





Willi Reschke's 27 victories were almost equally divided between his time as an Unteroffizier with 1./JG 302 flying Bf 109s and his service as a feldwebel (later oberfeldwebel) with 9. *Staffel* and the *Geschwaderstab* of JG 301, where he flew the Fw 190 and, latterly, the Ta 152

bomber victory (although he already had four others downed beyond the Reich's eastern borders, and a single P-51, under his belt). Reschke, in fact, would end the war as the *Gruppe's* highest scorer, just exceeding Hauptmann Heinrich Wurzer's overall total of 26. Wurzer, however, who had been severely wounded after claiming his last brace of B-24s over Vienna on 8 July, had achieved all his victories (including his opening pair of RAF 'heavies' by night) while flying the Bf 109, whereas nearly half of Reschke's final tally of 27 would be gained *after* I./JG 302's redesignation as III./JG 301 and conversion to the Fw 190.

But such emphasis on the successes of the (very) few is misleading. The closing months of the Defence of the Reich campaign were dominated by the ever-lengthening casualty lists. And, despite Göring's restrictions, veteran – if not always high-scoring – formation leaders continued to feature upon them.

II./JG 5's experiences were not atypical. This *Gruppe* had lost its recently appointed *Kommandeur*, Oberleutnant Hans Tetzner, during the engagements around Munich on 19 July. The following day, Oberleutnant Lorenz Andresen, *Staffelkapitän* of the attached 9./JG 5, was shot down by US fighters over central Germany. And a little over a month later, on 25 August, Tetzner's replacement at the head of the *Gruppe*, Oberstleutnant Kurt Kettner, would be killed in action against a major raid by the Eighth Air Force on aircraft component plants along the Baltic coast. The locations of these three losses, from Munich in the south to the Baltic in the north, also give an indication of just how thinly stretched the Defence of the Reich's forces now were.

The embattled Bf 109 *Gruppen* were still managing to claim victories, however. On 24 August, for example, the newcomers of III./JG 53 were credited with what was to be the highest score of their homeland defence career – eight B-17s downed over Luneburg Heath. One fell to the unit's long-serving *Kommandeur*, Major Franz Götz. It was '*Altwater*' ('Old Father') Götz's second heavy bomber over the Reich. He would add two more before being appointed *Kommodore* of JG 26 in January 1945.

But individual achievements counted for little against the repeated hammer blows of the Eighth and Fifteenth Air Forces – particularly those still being directed against the Reich's battered oil industry. At the end of August Hitler's armaments minister, Professor Albert Speer, was bemoaning the fact that, after the latest bombing raids, the production of aviation fuel in September would amount to little more than ten per cent of the total figure forecast just two weeks earlier. Speer went on to demand action from the Luftwaffe. What was needed, he said – and by mid-September at the latest – was one final mass attack against the enemy's bomber formations. He called for 'the best units, the most successful fighter pilots and at least 1200 fighter aircraft' to be made available at once.

It was just this kind of action that *General der Jagdflieger* Adolf Galland was already planning, although not within Speer's strict time limitations. Galland's 'Big Blow', as he termed it, was intended to inflict such swingeing losses upon the Americans that they would be forced to call a temporary halt to their bombing offensive – rather as they had done in the wake of the disastrous Schweinfurt-Regensburg raids a year earlier. Only this time, it was hoped, the breathing space would be even longer,





allowing time for the new wonder weapons – primarily the Me 262 jet fighter – to be put into service in decisive numbers.

To this end August and September saw further units returned, or added, to the Defence of the Reich commands. Among them were no fewer than ten Bf 109 *Gruppen* – I. and II./JG 3, III./JG 4, II./JG 11, III./JG 27, II./JG 53, I./JG 76 and all three *Gruppen* of JG 77. In October another two units would join them, III./JG 3 and I./JG 27, and in November yet two more, III./JG 1 and IV./JG 27. But Galland's attempts to mount his planned 'Big Blow' against the Eighth Air Force would be thwarted and his carefully husbanded Reich's Defence units hijacked by the Führer for another purpose entirely.

Meanwhile, the Bf 109 *Gruppen* remained in the unenviable position of having to protect Germany's industrial complexes from further damage on the one hand, and themselves from the Allies' overwhelming air superiority on the other. It was a battle they were losing on both fronts. Of the 20 major strikes launched by the Eighth and Fifteenth Air Forces in September, all but seven were directed principally against oil targets. The most costly to the enemy were the Eighth's raids on 11 and 12 September, from which a total of 75 bombers failed to return.

And the highest scorers among the defending Bf 109 *Gruppen* on these dates were, somewhat surprisingly, two of the newest additions to the ranks of Reich's Defence. III./JG 4 and I./JG 76 were both ex-*Zerstörergruppen* now converted to single-seaters and based on airfields to the south of Berlin. On 11 September III./JG 4 was vectored down from Alteno towards the B-17 formations attacking targets in the Chemnitz and Czech border areas, where they were credited with a dozen of the bombers and two P-51s. The twenty *Gustavs* of I./JG 76 were directed almost due west from nearby Gahro to intercept another bomber stream, only to be pounced upon near Kassel by two groups of Mustangs. In a protracted dogfight they claimed five of the superior enemy force.

The validity of some of these victories may be open to serious question, for the obvious inexperience of the two *Gruppen* is clearly reflected in

These Bf 109Ks of III./JG 77 were photographed at Neuruppin, northwest of Berlin, in 1944. Note the *Geschwader's Herz-As* (Ace of Hearts) badge on the cowling



their casualty figures. Each lost 14 pilots – over three quarters of their strength! III./JG 4 suffered nine killed and five wounded, while I./JG 76's casualties were equally divided. Despite these appalling losses, both were in action again the following day. Although ostensibly providing cover for the Fw 190s of II.(*Sturm*)/JG 4, each *Gruppe* nonetheless submitted claims for another seven Flying Fortresses apiece (which cost them a further 12 pilots killed and three wounded).

Also in action on that 12 September was a very 'old hare' indeed – in experience, if not in age. Alfred Grislawski had been a long-serving member of Hermann Graf's famous 9. 'Karaya' *Staffel* of JG 52 on the eastern front. He had then joined his erstwhile *Staffelkapitän* back in the homeland, serving under him first in JGr 50 and then, briefly, in JG 1. Recently transferred to III./JG 53 as *Kapitän* of 11. *Staffel*, Hauptmann Grislawski was credited with a brace of B-17s shot down in the Berlin area. These took his final score to 132, the last 23 of which – including 17 heavy bombers – had been claimed in Defence of the Reich.

Oddly, Grislawski would receive official credit for a further victory when he downed a P-38 on 26 September. Although this was the date on which he was himself wounded in a dogfight with Lightnings over Münster, he has denied submitting any such claim.

The above instances may be the extremes, but they accurately reflect the daily lot of the 19 Bf 109 *Jagdgruppen* flying in Defence of the Reich during the closing weeks of 1944. Most were composed of poorly trained youngsters, fighting against impossible odds. They were being killed or wounded in their hundreds and their names are now all-but forgotten. But among them were a few remaining veterans – the *Experten* who were trying to lead by example, and who were still adding to their totals, albeit with far less frequency than in their high-scoring heydays.

On 2 November the Eighth sustained its last major losses of the ongoing oil offensive when 40 of the nearly 1200 bombers despatched against Merseburg and other refineries in central Germany failed to return. But in the brutal war of attrition the defenders fared far worse, losing almost fifty per cent of the 305 fighters that engaged the enemy! And of the 73 pilots killed, nearly half came from the ranks of three Bf 109 *Gruppen* alone. II./JG 3 suffered most, sacrificing 12 for no known victories. I./JG 27 claimed two P-51s against 11 pilots lost, and IV./JG 27's four P-51s cost it ten killed.

The Luftwaffe's poor performance and catastrophic losses on 2 November were the subject of heated debate between Hitler and Luftwaffe Chief of General Staff *Generalmajor* Eckhard Christian four days later. Out of favour with his Führer for very obvious reasons, *Reichsmarschall* Göring was by now keeping a very low profile.

Hitler had been informed that 80 enemy aircraft had been shot down, including 30 by the two *Sturmgruppen* and 30 by flak;

Hauptmann Julius Meimberg, *Gruppenkommandeur* of II./JG 53, is awarded the Knight's Cross by Oberst Karl Hentschel at Malmshelm in October 1944. Meimberg ended the war with 59 victories to his credit, four of these being heavy bombers





'So the remaining 260 fighters in action managed to claim 20 between them. And they lost?'

'Ninety, *Mein Führer*.'

'Right – in 260 sorties they shoot down 20 and lose 90.'

'One other thing', Christian pointed out, 'The *Sturmgruppe* (sic) had another *Gruppe* flying solely as escort.'

'I don't give a damn about that. As far as I'm concerned, the escort *Gruppe* is supposed to shoot too. Enemy fighters were shot down as well, not just bombers?'

'Of course.'

'There you are then. The result is totally unsatisfactory.'

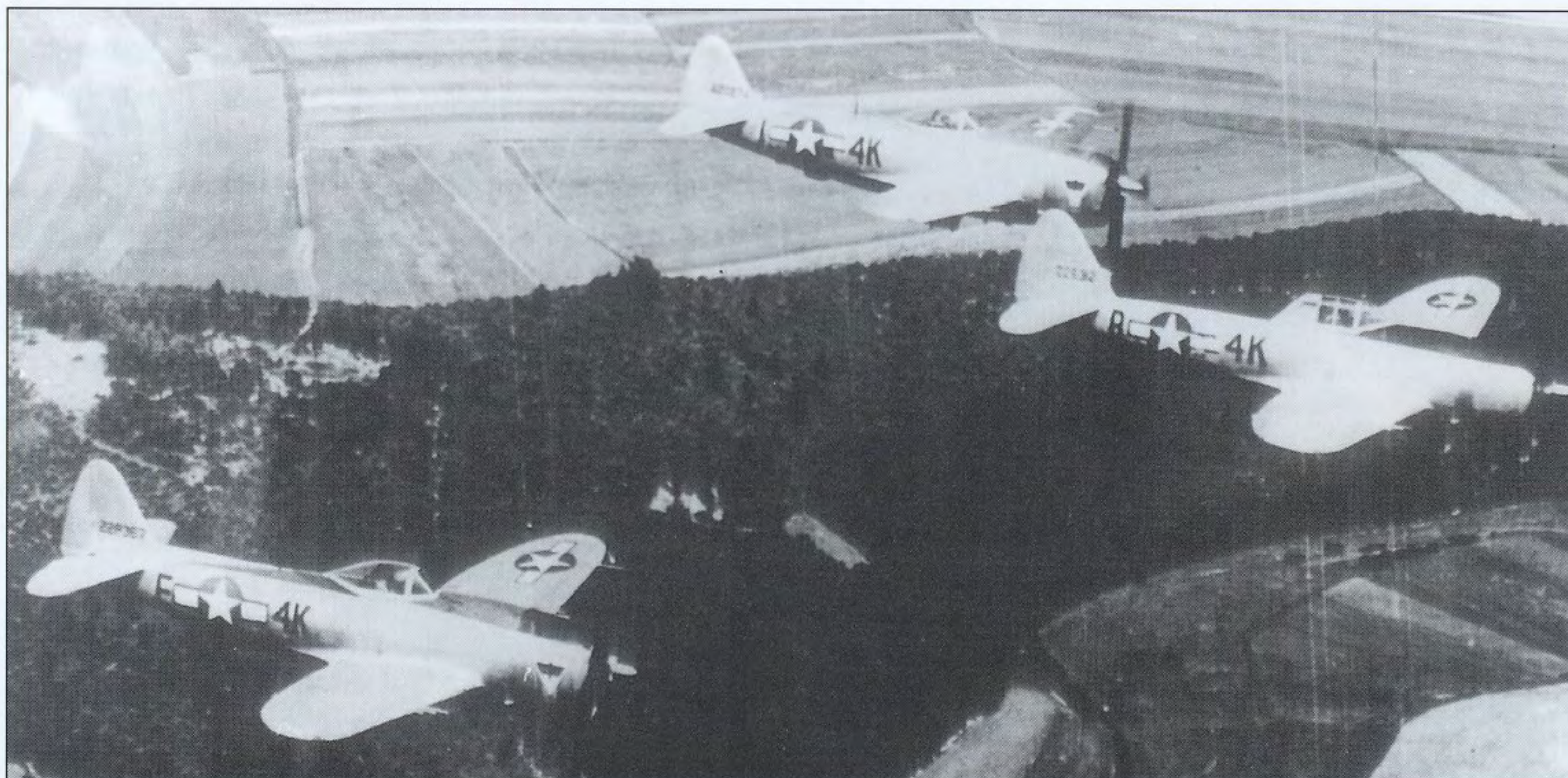
Christian tried to explain the difficulties the *Jagdgruppen* were operating under, but the Führer was having none of it;

'I'm saying nothing against the pilots – just the results obtained. Taking these figures, it would mean that if 2600 fighters went up I could expect them to achieve 200 victories. In other words, any hope of decimating the enemy by a massed attack is simply not there. It is therefore ridiculous to keep producing fighter aircraft just so that the Luftwaffe can operate in large numbers!'

It was the end of Galland's plans for a 'Big Blow'. Hitler would use the bulk of the western *Jagdgruppen* to support his own surprise counter-offensive in the Ardennes the following month. But before becoming involved in the Battle of the Bulge, as Hitler's last-ditch venture in the west is now commonly known, two of the Bf 109 *Gruppen* were to be credited with one final major success against Allied heavy bombers.

On 12 December 140 Lancasters of RAF Bomber Command mounted a daylight attack on steelworks in the Ruhr. Catching the British 'heavies' devoid of fighter cover, I./JG 3's *Gustavs* claimed 13 of them. Following close on their heels, IV./JG 27 added a further eight. But it appears that the bogey of over-optimistic claiming persisted right up until the end. Just seven Lancasters were in fact lost, with an eighth crash-landing at an Allied airfield in Belgium and another ditching in the North Sea (the two latter without aircrew casualties).

By the closing weeks of 1944 hundreds of Allied fighters and fighter-bombers, such as these P-47s of the Ninth Air Force's 404th FG, were roaming at will over Germany, shooting up anything that grabbed their attention either in the air or on the ground. Note the lead aircraft – a razorback D-model that has had its dorsal spine painted black to simulate a bubble canopy





Despite the critical situation there were still smiles to be seen, as here outside III./JG 77's ops building at Düsseldorf in late December 1944. The pilots are, from left to right, Leutnant Hans-Werner Renzow (*StaKa* 10./JG 77, half-hidden), *Gruppenkommandeur* Hauptmann Armin Köhler, Leutnant Heinrich Hackler (*StaKa* 11./JG 77, who would go down during *Bodenplatte* – see profile 34) and Unteroffizier Hasso Fröhlich (wounded on 23 December 1944)



At the other end of the spectrum, Oberleutnant Ernst-Wilhelm Reinert – ex-JG 77 veteran of the Russian and Mediterranean campaigns, and now *Staffelkapitän* of 14./JG 27 – was credited with the last of his 174 kills at the height of the Battle of the Bulge. His victim, about as far removed from a high-altitude heavy bomber as it was possible to get, was a humble Auster AOP aircraft. Reinert sent it down on 27 December near Eupen, south of Aachen – ironically, the very area where the Eighth's P-47 escort fighters had originally been forced to turn back for home.

Now the bubble-canopied successors to those early razorback Thunderbolts were the scourge of the skies above the Ardennes battlefield and beyond. Just four days earlier, on 24 December, they had accounted for one of the highest scoring Bf 109 *Experten* to be lost during the Ardennes fighting. Oberfeldwebel Heinrich Bartels of IV./JG 27 was just one short of his century when he was shot down south of Bonn.

Although they were utilised primarily for the same sort of medium to low-level missions as they had flown in Normandy, the Bf 109 *Gruppen* over the Ardennes did not suffer the same crippling losses. It was the ill-conceived operation of New Year's Day 1945 that would finally break the back of the *Jagdwaaffe* in the west.

Operation *Bodenplatte* ('Baseplate') was a travesty of Galland's cherished 'Big Blow'. No fewer than 33 *Jagdgruppen*, plus a number of other units, were assembled for a mass attack – not against one of the Eighth Air Force's bomber streams as the *General der Jagdflieger* had envisaged, but against a selected number of airfields occupied by the Allies' tactical air forces in the Low Countries and France.

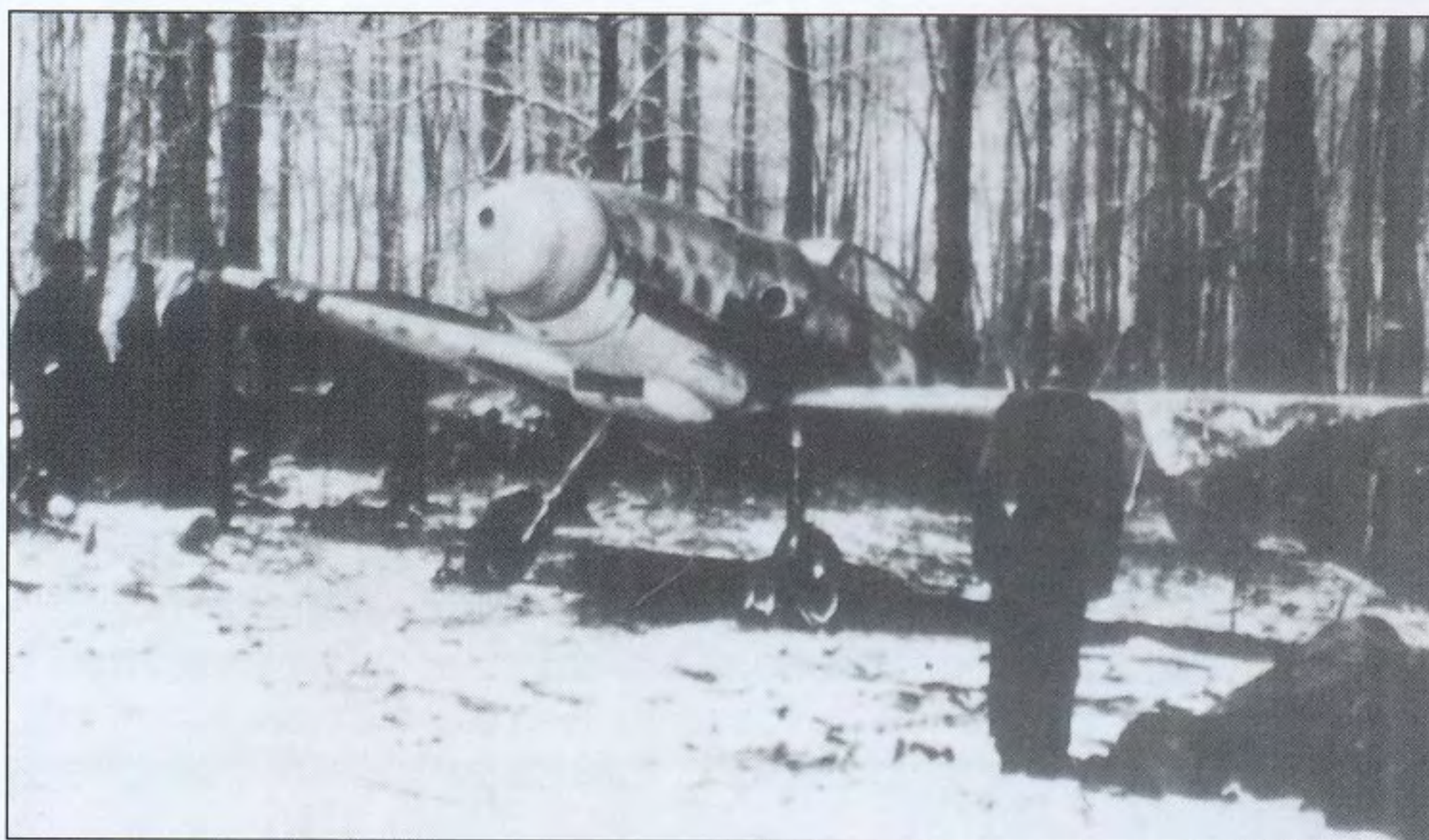
For very little return, the *Jagdwaaffe* lost over 200 pilots killed, missing or captured during *Bodenplatte*. Among these appalling casualties figures were two *Geschwaderkommodores*. One of them was JG 11's Major Günther Specht, who disappeared without trace near Maastricht, in Holland. Although *Stab* JG 11 had by this time converted to Fw 190s, Specht's loss – he remains missing to this day – broke one of the final links in the chain dating back to the beginnings of the Defence of the Reich.

The *Jagdwaaffe* in the west never recovered from the slaughter of 1 January 1945 (as well as the two *Kommodores*, it had also lost six *Gruppenkommandeure* and nine *Staffelkapitäne* – experienced formation

leaders that it was now impossible to replace). It was nevertheless sent up again just a fortnight later against yet another major raid by the Eighth Air Force on the Reich's already shattered oil industry. 25 *Jagdgruppen* were scrambled in response, 13 of them flying Bf 109s.

But rather than dealing the enemy a big blow, the defenders delivered their last gasp. The Americans lost just seven B-17s. They cost the *Jagdwaaffe* a further 107 pilots killed (including 43 from the Bf 109 *Gruppen*). Among the hardest hit were III. and IV./JG 300 (the latter





A Bf 109G-14 of III./JG 53 runs up its engine in a snowy dispersal among the trees at Kirrlach on 13 January 1945. This *Gruppe* did not participate in the next day's last major aerial battle in Defence of the Reich, but instead supported German ground troops on the west bank of the Rhine. JG 53 would continue in its tactical support role until the end in the west . . .

the ex-I./JG 76) – *Gruppen* that had not participated in *Bodenplatte* – who between them suffered 22 killed and four wounded.

It was the effective end of the Defence of the Reich campaign. Leaving just a skeleton force behind, most units were transferred eastwards during the next few days to oppose what was perceived to be a far greater and more immediate threat to the homeland than high flying bombers – the flood-tide of the Red Army already engulfing her eastern provinces.

And when the Eighth Air Force launched Mission No 968 – its final heavy bomber raid of the war – on airfields and marshalling yards in southeast Germany and Czechoslovakia on 25 April 1945, not one of the six Flying Fortresses that failed to return had fallen victim to a Luftwaffe fighter.

#### Die Schicksalsfrage:

## Wo ist die Luftwaffe?

Das ist die Frage, die eure Soldaten an der Ostfront und in Italien immer wieder gestellt haben.

„Die Luftwaffe verteidigt die Heimat“, sagte man ihnen.

#### JETZT AM HELLEN TAGE

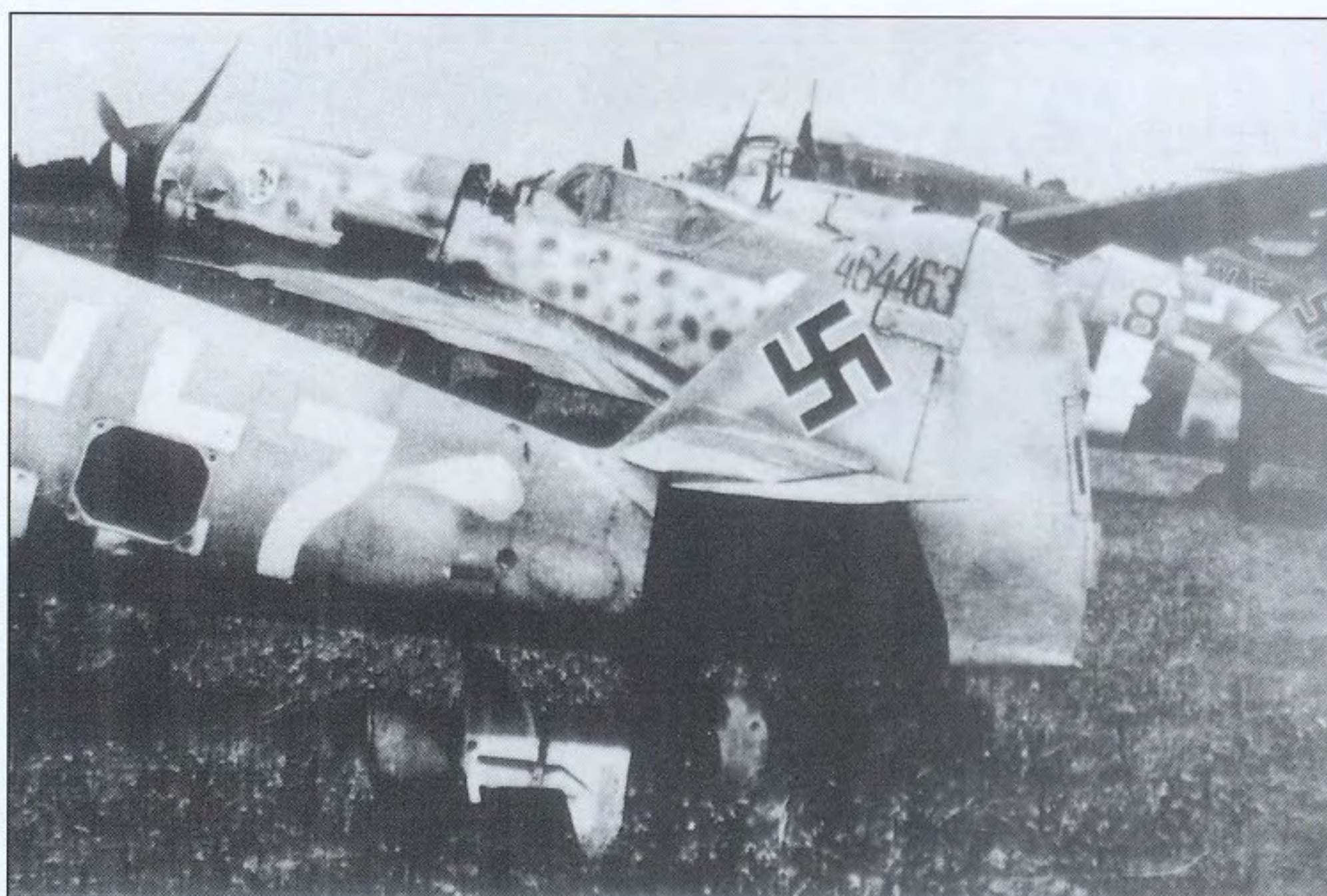
fliegen amerikanische Bomber in Massen über Berlin. Heute waren sie zum 5. Male über der Reichshauptstadt. Natürlich fragt auch ihr jetzt:

„Wo ist die Luftwaffe?“

**FRAGT GÖRING!  
FRAGT HITLER!**

USG 31

. . . and that end would not be long in coming. Although this US propaganda leaflet was dropped over Germany a year earlier, its message was even more apt by the spring of 1945. Its heading asks, 'Where is the Luftwaffe?' It then goes on to say, 'That is the question your soldiers on the eastern front and in Italy are always asking. They are being told; "The Luftwaffe is defending the homeland". It closes with, 'And now of course you are also asking "Where is the Luftwaffe?" Ask Göring! Ask Hitler!'



The answer was that what was left of it was lying scattered around, either singly or in dumps like this, without fuel and partially stripped of arms and equipment. Note the black-white-black Defence of the Reich bands on the IV./JG 4 machine second in the line-up – and the 'Plumed knight's helmet' *Geschwader* badge on the cowling. The battle – while not always as chivalrous as the latter might suggest – was, however, finally over



# APPENDICES

## AWARDS\*

|               |                            | Unit  | Score at time<br>of award | Final total/<br>Four-engined |
|---------------|----------------------------|-------|---------------------------|------------------------------|
| <b>SWORDS</b> |                            |       |                           |                              |
| 1/2/45        | Hptm Ernst-Wilhelm Reinert | JG 27 | 174                       | 174/2                        |
| 16/4/45       | Maj Werner Schroer         | JG 3  | 108                       | 114/26                       |

## OAK LEAVES

|          |                         |       |     |        |
|----------|-------------------------|-------|-----|--------|
| 20/6/43  | Maj Gustav Rödel        | JG 27 | 78  | 98/13  |
| 2/8/43   | Olt Joachim Kirschner   | JG 3  | 170 | 188/4  |
| 2/8/43   | Hptm Werner Schroer     | JG 27 | 84  | 114/26 |
| 25/11/43 | Hptm Wilhelm Lemke      | JG 3  | 130 | 131/3  |
| 2/3/44   | Olt Walter Krupinski    | JG 5  | 177 | 197/1  |
| 11/4/44  | Hptm Walter Grislawski  | JG 1  | 114 | 133/18 |
| 12/5/44  | Lt Leopold Münster(†)   | JG 3  | 95  | 95/15  |
| 20/7/44  | Olt Willy Kientsch      | JG 27 | 53  | 53/20  |
| 20/7/44  | Olt Otto Wessling(†)    | JG 3  | 83  | 83/11  |
| 25/11/44 | Maj Gerhard Michalski   | JG 4  | ?   | 73/13  |
| 21/1/45  | Lt Herbert Rollwage     | JG 53 | 70  | 71/14  |
| 1/2/45   | Hptm Herbert Schramm(†) | JG 27 | 42  | 42/3   |
| 14/2/45  | Maj Jürgen Harder       | JG 11 | 64  | 64/9   |

## KNIGHT'S CROSS

|          |                           |       |     |        |
|----------|---------------------------|-------|-----|--------|
| 29/8/43  | Hptm Emil Bitsch          | JG 3  | 105 | 108/4  |
| 22/11/43 | Lt Willy Kientsch         | JG 27 | 43  | 53/20  |
| 5/2/44   | Hptm Gustav Frielinghaus  | JG 3  | 74  | 74/0   |
| 5/2/44   | Olt Gerhard Loos          | JG 54 | 85  | 92/2   |
| 11/3/44  | Maj Walther Dahl          | JG 3  | 64  | 128/36 |
| 6/4/44   | Ofw Rudolf Ehrenberger(†) | JG 53 | 49  | 49/6   |
| 6/4/44   | Ofw Herbert Rollwage      | JG 53 | 53  | 102/14 |
| 8/4/44   | Obstlt Günther Specht     | JG 11 | 30  | 34/15  |
| 9/6/44   | Hptm Josef Haiböck        | JG 3  | 77  | 77/0   |
| 9/6/44   | Maj Klaus Quaet-Faslem(†) | JG 3  | 49  | 49/3   |
| 24/6/44  | Olt Georg-Peter Eder      | JG 1  | 49  | 72/36  |
| 24/6/44  | Hptm Hans Remmer(†)       | JG 27 | 26  | 26/8   |
| 8/7/44   | Olt Hans Grünberg         | JG 3  | 70  | 82/14  |
| 20/7/44  | Maj Ernst Düllberg        | JG 27 | 37  | 50/10  |
| 27/7/44  | Olt Franz Ruhl            | JG 3  | 34  | 37/?   |
| 3/8/44   | Maj Ernst Boerngen        | JG 27 | 38  | 38/24  |
| 19/8/44  | Hptm Gerhard Sommer(†)    | JG 11 | 20  | 20/14  |
| 24/10/44 | Hptm Horst Haase          | JG 3  | 56  | 56/10  |
| 24/10/44 | Maj Julius Meimberg       | JG 53 | 48  | 59/4   |
| 24/10/44 | Lt August Mors(†)         | JG 5  | ?   | ?/?    |
| 29/10/44 | Lt Oskar Zimmermann       | JG 3  | 28  | 30/?   |
| 6/12/44  | Hptm Franz Barten         | JG 53 | 52  | 52/?   |
| 14/1/45  | Ofw Eduard Isken          | JG 53 | 50  | 56/17  |



|         |                       |        |    |       |
|---------|-----------------------|--------|----|-------|
| 28/1/45 | Lt Fritz Gromotka     | JG 27  | 29 | 29/10 |
| 2/2/45  | Hptm Peter Jenne      | JG 300 | 17 | 17/12 |
| 7/2/45  | Maj Armin Köhler      | JG 77  | ?  | 69/13 |
| 22/2/45 | Maj Dr Peter Werfft   | JG 27  | 26 | 26/14 |
| 28/3/45 | Maj Wilhelm Steinmann | JG 4   | 43 | 44/6  |
| 20/4/45 | Maj Karl-Heinz Langer | JG 3   | 29 | 30/4  |
| 27/4/45 | Hptm Heinz Knoke      | JG 1   | 33 | 33/19 |

### Key

(\*) The above lists are based upon the names of pilots known to have been flying the Bf 109 in Defence of the Reich at the time of their awards. Many will have been decorated for victories previously scored either partly, or wholly, on other fronts. The figures quoted are overall totals, and do not refer specifically to claims made in Defence of the Reich

(†) Indicates that the award was conferred posthumously

## ORDERS OF BATTLE

### Bf 109 UNITS IN DEFENCE OF THE REICH

#### A: May 1943 – *Luftwaffenbefehlshaber Mitte*\*

| <i>Unit</i>   | <i>CO</i>                   | <i>Base</i>           | <i>Est-Serv</i>  |
|---------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------|------------------|
| I./JG 1       | Maj Fritz Losigkeit         | Deelen (re-equipping) |                  |
| Stab JG 3     | Oberst Wolf-Dietrich Wilcke | München-Gladbach      | 3 - 3            |
| I./JG 3       | Maj Klaus Quaet-Faslem      | München-Gladbach      | 40 - 17          |
| I./JG 11      | Hptm Günther Specht         | Jever                 | 54 - 27          |
| III./JG 11    | Hptm Ernst Günther Heinze   | Neumünster (forming)  |                  |
| I./JG 27      | Hptm Erich Hohagen          | Poix/Leeuwarden       | 37 - 24          |
| III./JG 54    | Hptm Siegfried Schnell      | Oldenburg             | 45 - 41          |
| <b>Totals</b> |                             |                       | <b>179 - 112</b> |

(\*) Luftwaffe GOC Central, re-designated *Luftflotte Reich* on 3/2/44

#### B: May 1944 – *Luftflotte Reich*

|            |                           |                     |         |
|------------|---------------------------|---------------------|---------|
| III./JG 1  | Maj Hartmann Grasser      | Paderborn           | 48 - 21 |
| Stab JG 3  | Maj Friedrich-Karl Müller | Salzwedel           | 4 - 2   |
| I./JG 3    | Hptm Hellmut Mertens      | Burg bei Magdeburg  | 26 - 9  |
| II./JG 3   | Hptm Gustav Frielinghaus  | Gardelegen          | 29 - 23 |
| III./JG 3  | Maj Walther Dahl          | Bad Wörishofen      | 31 - 9  |
| I./JG 5    | Maj Horst Carganico       | Herzogenaurach      | 43 - 36 |
| II./JG 5   | Hptm Theo Weissenberger   | Gardelegen          | 44 - 36 |
| Stab JG 11 | Maj Günther Specht        | Oldenburg           | 4 - 3   |
| II./JG 11  | Hptm Walter Krupinski     | Hustedt             | 31 - 14 |
| Stab JG 27 | Oberst Gustav Rödel       | Wien-Seyring        | 4 - 4   |
| I./JG 27   | Maj Karl-Wolfgang Redlich | Fels am Wagram      | 44 - 34 |
| II./JG 27  | Hptm Fritz Keller         | Wiesbaden-Erbenheim | 24 - 12 |
| III./JG 27 | Hptm Ernst Düllberg       | Götzenhof           | 26 - 20 |



|             |                      |                      |         |
|-------------|----------------------|----------------------|---------|
| IV./JG 27   | Hptm Otto Meyer      | Steinamanger (Hung.) | 22 - 16 |
| II./JG 53   | Hptm Julius Meimberg | Frankfurt-Eschborn   | 31 - 14 |
| I./JG 300   | Maj Gerhard Stamp    | Merzhausen           | 29 - 19 |
| III./JG 300 | Maj Iro Ilk          | Wiesbaden-Erbenheim  | 27 - 25 |
| I./JG 301   | Hptm Richard Kamp    | Neubiberg            | 25 - 21 |
| I./JG 302   | Hptm Richard Lewens  | Wien-Seyring         | 27 - 11 |

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|               |  |  |                  |
|---------------|--|--|------------------|
| <b>Totals</b> |  |  | <b>519 - 329</b> |
|---------------|--|--|------------------|

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**C: 30 June 1944 – Luftflotte Reich (Post-Normandy Restructuring: No figures available)**

|             |                      |                 |  |
|-------------|----------------------|-----------------|--|
| II./JG 5    | Olt Hans Tetzner     | Salzwedel       |  |
| I./JG 300   | Maj Gerhard Stamp    | Bad Wörrishofen |  |
| III./JG 300 | Maj Iro Ilk          | Jüterbog        |  |
| I./JG 302   | Hptm Heinrich Wurzer | Götzendorf      |  |

(Re-forming and/or re-equipping)

|            |                     |                 |  |
|------------|---------------------|-----------------|--|
| I./JG 3    | Hptm Helmut Mertens | Wunstorf        |  |
| II./JG 27  | Hptm Fritz Keller   | Fels am Wagram  |  |
| III./JG 53 | Maj Franz Götz      | Bad Lippspringe |  |

**5 September 1944 (Post-Normandy Restructuring)**

|             |                       |                    |         |
|-------------|-----------------------|--------------------|---------|
| Stab JG 3   | Maj Heinz Bär         | Königsberg/Neumark | 12 - 5  |
| I./JG 3     | Hptm Ernst Laube      | Borkheide          | 18 - 14 |
| III./JG 4   | Hptm Friedrich Eberle | Alteno             | 68 - 58 |
| II./JG 5    | Hptm Franz Wienhusen  | Reinsdorf          | 24 - 9  |
| III./JG 300 | Maj Iro Ilk           | Jüterbog           | 20 - 18 |
| Stab JG 11  | Maj Günther Specht    | Finsterwalde       | ? - ?   |
| II./JG 27   | Hptm Fritz Keller     | Finsterwalde       | 45 - 23 |
| III./JG 53  | Maj Franz Götz        | Möritz             | 52 - 36 |
| I./JG 76    | ?                     | Gahro              | 62 - 50 |
| I./JG 302   | Hptm Heinrich Wurzer  | Schafstädt         | 25 - 13 |
| Stab JG 300 | Oberst Walther Dahl   | Erfurt-Bundesleben | 5 - 3   |
| I./JG 300   | Maj Gerhard Stamp     | Esperstedt         | 30 - 23 |
| JGr 10      | ?                     | Parchim            | 17 - 14 |

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|               |  |  |                  |
|---------------|--|--|------------------|
| <b>Totals</b> |  |  | <b>378 - 266</b> |
|---------------|--|--|------------------|

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(Re-forming and/or re-equipping)

|           |                         |              |  |
|-----------|-------------------------|--------------|--|
| III./JG 1 | Hptm Heinz Knoke        | Burbach      |  |
| II./JG 3  | Hptm Herbert Kutscha    | Ziegenhain   |  |
| I./JG 5   | Hptm Theo Weissenberger | Wunstorf     |  |
| I./JG 27  | Hptm Rudolf Sinner      | Rotenburg    |  |
| IV./JG 27 | Hptm Hanns-Heinz Dudeck | Hustedt      |  |
| I./JG 53  | Maj Jürgen Harder       | Wien-Seyring |  |
| IV./JG 53 | Hptm Hans Morr          | Oldenburg    |  |

**D: January 1945 – Luftflotte Reich**

|             |                         |           |         |
|-------------|-------------------------|-----------|---------|
| I./JG 300   | Hptm Herbert Schob      | Borkheide | 57 - 37 |
| III./JG 300 | Hptm Herbert Nölter     | Jüterbog  | 44 - 38 |
| IV./JG 300  | Hptm Heiner Ofterdinger | Wittstock | 53 - 39 |

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|               |  |  |                  |
|---------------|--|--|------------------|
| <b>Totals</b> |  |  | <b>154 - 114</b> |
|---------------|--|--|------------------|

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**Lw.Kdo.West**

|            |                            |                      |         |
|------------|----------------------------|----------------------|---------|
| I./JG 3    | Olt Alfred Seidl           | Paderborn            | 31 - 22 |
| III./JG 3  | Maj Karl-Heinz Langer      | Bad Lippspringe      | 32 - 26 |
| I./JG 4    | Hptm Wilhelm Steinmann     | Darmstadt            | 41 - 33 |
| III./JG 4  | Hptm Gerhard Strasen       | Griesheim            | 13 - 10 |
| IV./JG 4   | Hptm Ernst Laube           | Frankfurt/Rhein-Main | 26 - 17 |
| II./JG 11  | Hptm Karl Leonhard         | Zellhausen           | 37 - 31 |
| Stab JG 27 | Maj Ludwig Franzisket      | Rheine               | 2 - 2   |
| I./JG 27   | Hptm Eberhard Schade       | Rheine               | 33 - 24 |
| II./JG 27  | Hptm Herbert Kutscha       | Rheine/Hopsten       | 25 - 20 |
| III./JG 27 | Hptm Dr Peter Werfft       | Hesepe               | 28 - 23 |
| IV./JG 27  | Hptm Ernst-Wilhelm Reinert | Achmer               | 24 - 22 |
| Stab JG 53 | Obstlt Helmut Bennemann    | Echterdingen         | 4 - 1   |
| II./JG 53  | Hptm Julius Meimberg       | Malmshein            | 46 - 29 |
| III./JG 53 | Maj Franz Götz             | Kirrlach             | 39 - 25 |
| IV./JG 53  | Hptm Alfred Hammer         | Echterdingen         | 46 - 34 |
| Stab JG 77 | Obstlt Erich Leie          | Dortmund             | 2 - 1   |
| I./JG 77   | Hptm Joachim Deicke        | Dortmund             | 43 - 24 |
| II./JG 77  | Maj Siegfried Freytag      | Bönninghardt         | 32 - 20 |
| III./JG 77 | Maj Armin Köhler           | Dortmund             | 10 - 7  |

**Totals****514 - 371****E: April 1945 – Luftflotte Reich**

|            |                      |                  |         |
|------------|----------------------|------------------|---------|
| III./JG 4  | Hptm Gerhard Strasen | Jüterbog-Altdamm | 61 - 56 |
| I./JG 27   | Hptm Emil Clade      | Salzwedel        | 29 - 13 |
| II./JG 27  | Hptm Fritz Keller    | Schwerin         | 48 - 27 |
| III./JG 27 | Hptm Dr Peter Werfft | Grossenhain      | 19 - 15 |

**Totals****157 - 111****LW.Kdo.West**

|            |                           |                |         |
|------------|---------------------------|----------------|---------|
| Stab JG 53 | Obstlt Helmut Bennemann   | Erbenschwang   | 1 - 1   |
| II./JG 53  | Maj Julius Meimberg       | Ulm-Risstissen | 39 - 24 |
| III./JG 53 | Hptm Siegfried Luckenbach | Kreuzstrasse   | 40 - 24 |
| IV./JG 53  | Hptm Alfred Hammer        | Reichenbach    | 54 - 27 |

**Totals****134 - 76**



## 1

**Bf 109G-1/R2y 'Black 3' of Leutnant Heinz Knoke, 2./JG 1, Jever, February 1943**

The only distinguishing marks on the otherwise standard finish of this high-altitude pressurised Bf 109G-1 are the victory bars on the rudder recording two of the pilot's kills. The first is topped by an RAF roundel (although, confusingly, Knoke already had two British machines to his credit by this stage in his frontline career). The second, surmounted by an American star, is for the B-24 claimed by Heinz Knoke on 16 February 1943. A real stalwart of the daylight Defence of the Reich campaign from the beginning, Knoke would, fittingly, be the very last of its *Experten* to be awarded a much coveted Knight's Cross.

## 2

**Bf 109G-6 'White Double Chevron' of Hauptmann Friedrich Eberle, Gruppenkommandeur III./JG 1, Leeuwarden, October 1943**

The heavily dappled, Erla-canopied *Gustav* 'gunboat' flown by the III./JG 1 *Gruppenkommandeur* displays the tightly spiralled spinner markings common to the unit's machines of the period. Note that the fighter is devoid of the regulation III. *Gruppe* vertical bar behind the fuselage *Balkenkreuz*, but that it does wear the white vertical tail surfaces indicative of a formation leader.

## 3

**Bf 109G-6 'White 20' of Hauptmann Friedrich Eberle, Gruppenkommandeur III./JG 1, München-Gladbach, March 1944**

When compared with the previous profile, this Bf 109G-6 offers a complete change of markings for one of the *Kommandeur's* later machines. Although the spinner spirals and white tail are now gone, the aircraft does boast a telltale III. *Gruppe* bar superimposed on the rear fuselage red Defence of the Reich band. It also features two further late war marking innovations – the command chevrons have been replaced by the number '20' (a common practice among JG 1's *Gruppe* CO's) and the new 'Winged 1' *Geschwader* emblem is displayed. This was not Eberle's first 'White 20', as he had bailed out of an earlier one after tangling with P-47s over Holland two months previously.

## 4

**Bf 109G-6 'Black 1' of Oberleutnant Herwig Zuzic, Staffelfkapitän 8./JG 1, Leeuwarden, June 1943**

A wealth of unique markings adorn this Bf 109G, which was assigned to Oberleutnant Zuzic, the first *Staffelfkapitän* of the newly reconstituted 8./JG 1. These markings are, from left to right, the *Staffel's* somewhat tongue-in-cheek emblem (a dachshund cocking its leg against Uncle Sam's top hat), the pilot's own red heart insignia below the cockpit, and his nickname (*Lauser*, which is German for ragamuffin). Finally, the fighter's rudder features the 13 kills Zuzic had brought with him from the eastern front (see page 27 for details). He would add just one B-17 victory in Defence of the Reich before being killed in a mid-air collision on 19 August 1943.

## 5

**Bf 109G-6 'Black 5' of Feldwebel Alfred Miksch, 8./JG 1, Leeuwarden, July 1943**

Also assigned to Zuzic's 8. *Staffel*, Miksch arrived from service on the eastern front (where he had been assigned to III./JG 3) with an even higher tally – 37 – of enemy aircraft destroyed. A brace of Mustangs and a Flying Fortress subsequently took Miksch's score to the 40 shown here on the rudder of his Bf 109G-6 'Black 5'. He would duly claim two more Flying Fortresses and a Lightning destroyed before being killed in action near Nijmegen, in Holland, on 1 December 1943.

## 6

**Bf 109G-4 'Black Double Chevron 1' of Hauptmann Klaus Quaet-Faslem, Gruppenkommandeur I./JG 3 'Udet', München-Gladbach, circa May 1943**

The command markings displayed by Hauptmann Quaet-Faslem's rather darkly segmented Bf 109G-4 are reportedly a combination of standard *Gruppenkommandeur's* chevrons, plus a 'Black 1' referring back to the pilot's previous command as *Staffelkapitän* of 2./JG 53. The longest serving of all I./JG 3's ten *Kommandeure*, Major Quaet-Faslem lost his life when he crashed in bad weather on 30 January 1944. He had claimed just three B-17s on Defence of the Reich operations.

## 7

**Bf 109G-6/AS 'Black 14' of Unteroffizier Horst Petzschler, 2./JG 3 'Udet', Burg bei Magdeburg, May 1944**

An example of the low-visibility overall light blue-grey finish briefly adopted by several of the Reich's Defence specialised high-altitude Bf 109 *Gruppen*, 'Black 14' was lost in action against P-51s near Magdeburg on 30 May 1944 while being flown by another pilot. Petzschler himself scored four kills – two fighters and two heavy bombers – in defence of the homeland before being wounded. He subsequently returned to his original unit, JG 51, surviving the war with a total of 27 victories.

## 8

**Bf 109G-6 'Double Chevron' of Major Kurt Brändle, Gruppenkommandeur II./JG 3 'Udet', Schiphol, October 1943**

Major Brändle's heavily dappled *Gustav* sports non-standard markings in the style peculiar to many of II. *Gruppe's* machines of this period. These include the 'mirror image' rearward-flying 'Winged U' *Geschwader* emblem (which would be correctly facing forward on the starboard cowling – the unit painter presumably always used the same side of the stencil for both left and right-hand badges!), the unexplained large red dot below the emblem and the outline-only fuselage symbols. Recent research suggests that only the last two of Kurt Brändle's 172 victories were actually claimed in Defence of the Reich. These were a brace of Thunderbolts brought down during a mission on 3 November 1943. Brändle himself failed to return from a second operation flown by II./JG 3 later that same day.



## 9

**Bf 109G-6 'White 10' of Leutnant Franz Ruhl, Staffelkapitän 4./JG 3 'Udet', Rotenburg, February 1944**

Franz Ruhl's rather tired looking Bf 109G-6 'White 10' also sports the back-to-front 'Winged U' synonymous with aircraft flown by the 'Udet' *Geschwader*. Note, however, the solid fuselage markings – white individual numeral combined with black horizontal *Gruppe* bar. Another unique feature of this aircraft is the partial white band forward of the tailplane, although the fuselage spine was left camouflaged possibly to reduce the risk of being spotted from the air. Leutnant Ruhl's numerous Defence of the Reich victories included at last 14 heavy bombers destroyed before he was reported missing in action on 24 December 1944 at the height of the Battle of the Bulge.

## 10

**Bf 109G-6 'Black 1' of Hauptmann Joachim Kirschner, Staffelkapitän 5./JG 3 'Udet', Schiphol, October 1943**

His machine bearing similar markings to Kurt Brändle's (profile 8), Joachim Kirschner was credited with four Flying Fortresses and a single fighter – victories 171-175 – during his brief stint on homeland defence duties. On 18 October 1943 he was appointed *Gruppenkommandeur* of IV./JG 27, then operating in the Aegean/Balkan areas, where he would be shot down by Spitfires on 17 December 1943.

## 11

**Bf 109G-6y 'White 1' of Hauptmann Karl-Heinz Langer, Staffelkapitän 7./JG 3 'Udet', Bad Wörishofen, Autumn 1943**

The most distinctive feature of Karl-Heinz Langer's 'White 1' is undoubtedly the white shooting star adorning the *Beule* (the bulge housing the breeches of the Bf 109G-6's MG 131 heavy machine guns). This marking was carried by virtually all 7. *Staffel* machines, and is said to have been inspired by the underwing rockets with which the unit had previously been equipped. Major Langer served as *Gruppenkommandeur* of III./JG 3 for the final year of the war, and during this time his final score reached 30, which included four Flying Fortresses in Defence of the Reich.

## 12

**Bf 109G-6 'Yellow 7' of Hauptmann Wilhelm Lemke, Staffelkapitän 9./JG 3 'Udet', Bad Wörishofen, Autumn 1943**

One of Langer's fellow *Staffelkapitäne* at Bad Wörishofen in the autumn of 1943 was Wilhelm Lemke of 9./JG 3. Unfortunately, his machine does not sport that unit's equally striking marking – a large yellow, black and white eye painted on the *Beule* (see photograph on page 49). Newly appointed as *Kommandeur* of II./JG 3, Lemke was awarded the Oak Leaves on 25 November 1943 for his 130 victories. The final five in this impressive tally were two P-47s and three B-17s in Defence of the Reich. Lemke himself then fell victim to P-47s over Holland just nine days later.

## 13

**Bf 109G-6 'Black Double Chevron' of Hauptmann Wilhelm Moritz, Gruppenkommandeur IV./JG 3 'Udet', Salzwedel, May 1944**

Oberleutnant Moritz had been *Staffelkapitän* of the original II./JG 1 for the greater part of 1942 before being posted to

JG 51 on the eastern front. Now *Gruppenkommandeur* of IV./JG 3, and flying the Bf 109G-6 'gunboat' depicted here on Defence of the Reich duties, Moritz already had 39 victories under his belt. But it was his leadership of the unit after its imminent conversion to the Fw 190, and subsequent daring operations in the *Sturm* role (see *Osprey Aviation Elite Units 20*) that would be Moritz's finest hour.

## 14

**Bf 109G-14 'White 13' of Hauptmann Ernst Laube, Gruppenkommandeur IV./JG 4, Frankfurt/Rhein-Main, January 1945**

Typical of the many long-serving leaders – possessing a wealth of operational experience, if not necessarily very high scores – who commanded Defence of the Reich *Gruppen* during the closing weeks of the campaign, Ernst Laube had claimed his first victory over Malta in the spring of 1941 as a member of Joachim Müncheberg's famous 7./JG 26. Since then he had served with various units, latterly as the *Kommandeur* of I./JG 3 with whom his score had risen to 18. Laube is known to have added at least three more, all US fighters, after assuming command of IV./JG 4 on 19 December 1944.

## 15

**Bf 109G-14/ASy 'Black 13' of Oberleutnant Ernst Scheufele, Staffelkapitän 14./JG 4, Reinersdorf, October 1944**

Wearing identical Defence of the Reich aft fuselage markings as Laube's Bf 109G-14 above (a combination of JG 4's distinctive black-white-black bands with IV. *Gruppe*'s shallow wavy bar superimposed), Scheufele's machine also carries an individual name below the cockpit. It would appear that the number '13' was regarded as a particularly lucky one by JG 4's formation leaders. Fortune certainly deserted Ernst Scheufele when he was brought down by anti-aircraft fire southeast of Aachen on 3 December 1944 . . . at the controls of another pilot's 'Black 2'! The ace's final tally of 18 victories included three heavy bombers.

## 16

**Bf 109G-5/AS 'Black Double Chevron' of Hauptmann Theodor Weissenberger, Gruppenkommandeur I./JG 5, Gardelegen, June 1944**

Wearing a textbook set of *Kommandeur*'s markings, this is reportedly the machine that newly appointed Theo Weissenberger took to the Normandy front. He was flying this aircraft on 12 June when he clashed with P-47s near St André and shot three of them down, although he returned to base wounded. Weissenberger was back in action the following month, however, attaining his double century when he shot down a Spitfire southeast of Rouen on 25 July. Returning to Defence of the Reich duties, he finally left the *Gruppe* in November 1944 (after its redesignation as III./JG 6) to convert to Me 262 jet fighters.

## 17

**Bf 109G-6 'White 1' of Oberleutnant Günther Schwanecke, Staffelkapitän 4./JG 5, Salzwedel, July 1944**

Depicted immediately after II./JG 5's return from the Normandy front, the pristine condition of Günther Schwanecke's Bf 109G-6 'White 1' suggests that it is a replacement machine. Note



the small *Gruppe* badge on the cowling. II./JG 5 was also redesignated in November 1944 when it became IV./JG 4. Schwanecke then served briefly as the *Staffelkapitän* of 13./JG 4, before joining his new unit's *Geschwaderstab*. He added several more confirmed kills to the ten victories that he had previously scored with II./JG 5, the last of them in the Berlin area during the closing days of the war.

## 18

**Bf 109G-5 'Black Double Chevron' of Hauptmann Günther Specht, *Gruppenkommandeur* II./JG 11, Plantlünne, December 1943**

This *Kommandeur's* machine bears its pilot's personal insignia of a winged pencil. It is not known for certain what this was intended to represent. Most are of the opinion that it was the irrepressible Specht's way of waving goodbye to paperwork – the hated 'bumph' that is the bane of every unit CO the world over. Surely he could not have harboured a secret desire to pilot a Do 17 'Flying Pencil'? Whatever the truth, it was soon to give way to JG 11's official (but much more bombastic) unit badge. Note here the *Geschwader's* yellow Defence of the Reich aft fuselage band, and Specht's victory tally on the rudder – six British and 16 American aircraft destroyed – which pinpoint the date as early December 1943. Number 22 was a P-47 downed near Oldenburg on 29 November.

## 19

**Bf 109G-6 'Black 1' of Oberleutnant Heinz Knoke, *Staffelkapitän* 5./JG 11, Jever, May 1943**

Heinz Knoke's new Bf 109G-6 is seen here in post-'aerial bomber' mode, equipped with the appreciably more effective underwing rocket tubes. It has yet to exchange the thin red aft fuselage band for the broad yellow of Specht's machine above, but it is sporting white vertical tail surfaces as befits Knoke's present position as a formation leader. Seven more US victory bars have since been added to the score shown on the rudder of the Bf 109G-1 depicted in profile 1. This also helps to confirm the date, for Oberleutnant Knoke's ninth victim was a Flying Fortress shot down *en route* to Kiel on 19 May 1943.

## 20

**Bf 109G-6 'Black 10' of Feldwebel Hans-Gerd Wennekers, 5./JG 11, Jever, June 1943**

Feldwebel Wennekers often flew as Knoke's *Katschmarek*, or wingman. His 'Black 10' also wears the narrow rear fuselage red band, but has forsaken the rocket-launching tubes in accordance with the newly issued instructions that all Bf 109 *Gruppen* operating against American heavy bombers were to be armed with underwing cannon. One of the diminishing number of veteran non-commissioned officers who formed the backbone of JG 11 throughout the remainder of the war, Wennekers was actually an officer candidate (*fahnenjunker-oberfeldwebel*) at the time of his 20th, and final, victory – a Soviet Pe-2 twin-engined bomber downed east of Berlin on 16 April 1945.

## 21

**Bf 109G-6y 'Yellow 1' of Oberleutnant Hermann Hintzen, *Staffelkapitän* 6./JG 11, Jever, June 1943**

This *Gustav* of 6./JG 11 displays the *Staffel's* short-lived emblem on its cowling. Called the *Boeing-Klau* (Boeing-pincher)

it consisted of a villainous figure with a sack of Boeings draped over its shoulder, and was based on the 'coal-pincher' propaganda character used throughout the war to encourage the German population to save energy. Hermann Hintzen outlived his unit's comic badge by a long margin. Previously the *Kapitän* of *Jasta* Helgoland, he left 6./JG 11 in December 1943 to take up the first of a series of training appointments, during which time he added at least three more victories to the four he had achieved while flying frontline ops.

## 22

**Bf 109T 'Black 6' of Oberleutnant Herbert Christmann, *Staffelkapitän* 11./JG 11, Lister/Norway, Spring 1944**

Hermann Hintzen had been *Jasta* Helgoland's first *Kapitän*. Herbert Christmann (ex-JGr 50) was its last, continuing in command after the *Staffel's* redesignation as 11./JG 11 and until his posting to 1./JG 11 on the Normandy front in August 1944. His flamboyantly decorated *Toni* is seen here during 11./JG 11's secondment to *Luftflotte* 5 in Scandinavia. Christmann's final score prior to his being killed in action over France on 20 August is not known for certain. It numbered at least six, and included two B-17s, one downed on the third day of 'Big Week'.

## 23

**Bf 109G-6 'Black Double Chevron' of Major Ludwig Franzisket, *Gruppenkommandeur* I./JG 27, Fels am Wagram, February 1944**

This fighter features a set of standard *Kommandeur* symbols and the familiar formation leader's white tail, but combined this time with JG 27's sage green Defence of the Reich band and I *Gruppe's* now somewhat inappropriate *Afrika* badge. Ludwig Franzisket had commanded both 1. and 3. *Staffeln* in North Africa, where he had claimed 24 victories (plus another over Malta). In Defence of the Reich he would add four B-17s to take his overall wartime total to 43.

## 24

**Bf 109G-6 'Yellow 3' of Leutnant Willy Kientsch, *Staffelkapitän* 6./JG 27, Wiesbaden-Erbenheim, November 1943**

Another ex-Africa veteran, Willy Kientsch had been one of II. *Gruppe's* most successful pilots in the desert and Mediterranean areas, where he scored his first 41 victories (including nine heavy bombers). The rudder tally of 43 shown here – the last two a pair of B-17s downed near Stuttgart on 6 September 1943 – would win him the Knight's Cross two months later (by which time he had added another Flying Fortress). At the time of his death on 29 January 1944, Kientsch's final total stood at 53, 20 of which were heavy bombers. Note the *Gruppe* badge on the cowling.

## 25

**Bf 109G-6 'Yellow 1' of Leutnant Dr Peter Werfft, *Staffelkapitän* 9./JG 27, Vienna-Seyring, March 1944**

Wearing an appreciably narrower aft fuselage band than Ludwig Franzisket's Bf 109G-6 (presumably to leave space for the vertical III. *Gruppe* bar?), Leutnant Dr Peter Werfft's *Gustav* is seen here displaying 11 victories on its white rudder. One of the *Luftwaffe's* oldest pilots, Dr Werfft would end the war, at the age of 40, as *Kommandeur* of III. *Gruppe*,



and with a total of 26 victories to his name – 14 of them heavy bombers (three in the Mediterranean and eleven in Defence of the Reich).

## 26

### **Bf 109G-6 'Black Double Chevron' of Hauptmann Otto Meyer, Gruppenkommandeur IV./JG 27, Graz, March 1944**

Hauptmann Meyer's machine displays neither the *Gruppe* badge nor a Defence of the Reich band. It does, however, sport an oversized pair of command chevrons, leaving no doubt as to its pilot's identity. Otto Meyer's final total of 21 victories included eight heavy bombers downed in Defence of the Reich. But his final three kills were a trio of P-47s claimed six days into the Normandy campaign on 12 June 1944. Meyer himself would be reported missing in the Caen area exactly one month later.

## 27

### **Bf 109G-6 'White 10' of Oberleutnant Alfred Grislawski, Staffelkapitän 1./JGr 50, Wiesbaden-Erbenheim, September 1943**

One of several high-scoring ex-eastern front comrades of Hermann Graf who subsequently served under him in JGr 50, Grislawski kept a careful record of his prowess on the rudder of his 'White 10'. Below the Knight's Cross decorated with his initials and the number '40' (his score at the time of winning the award) are a further 72 victory bars. The last three are for B-17s. Grislawski would add 14 heavy bombers and at least five fighters to his tally during his subsequent Defence of the Reich career. Note the Graf-inspired unit badge known as 'The Red Hunter'.

## 28

### **Bf 109G-6 'Yellow 1' of Leutnant Alfred Hammer, Staffelkapitän 6./JG 53 'Pik-As', Vienna-Seyring, February 1944**

A more modest score is depicted on the white rudder of Alfred Hammer's *Gustav*. The last of the 11 victories shown here was a B-24 downed on 30 January 1944. By war's end Hammer's total had reached 26, including a second Liberator. Note JG 53's famous 'Pik-As' (Ace of Spades) badge on the cowling and the red aft fuselage band worn by machines of II. *Gruppe* at this time.

## 29

### **Bf 109G-6 'Black 2' of Oberfeldwebel Herbert Rollwage, 5./JG 53 'Pik-As', Vienna-Seyring, January 1944**

Very similar in finish to Hammer's 'Yellow 1' above, Herbert Rollwage's Bf 109G-6 'gunboat' also displays the *Geschwader's* well known badge and a red aft fuselage band. By war's end Rollwage had added another 20+ victories to the 49 shown here on the rudder of his machine. His final total – all scored while serving with JG 53 – is not known for certain, but is accepted to be in excess of 71 (including 14 heavy bombers, all but two of which were claimed in Defence of the Reich operations).

## 30

### **Bf 109K-4 'Yellow 1' of Leutnant Günther Landt, Staffelkapitän 11./JG 53 'Pik-As', Kirrlach, February 1945**

Typical of JG 53's machines in the west during the closing months of the war, 'Micki' Landt's Bf 109K-4 wears a drab coat of brown and green and sports the *Geschwader's* definitive broad black Defence of the Reich aft fuselage band. Note, however, that the unit's distinctive 'Ace of Spades' insignia has now disappeared (it would survive to the end only on the aircraft flown by I./JG 53 based in Hungary). Landt's final total of 23 victories – again all scored with JG 53 – is believed to have consisted entirely of fighters and medium bombers.

## 31

### **Bf 109G-6 'Yellow 1' of Oberleutnant Wilhelm Schilling, Staffelkapitän 9./JG 54, Ludwigslust, February 1944**

The 'orphans' of Reich's Defence, III./JG 54 nonetheless played an integral and major role in protecting the homeland after being brought back from the eastern front in exchange for I./JG 26 and never thereafter returned to their parent *Geschwader*. This *Gustav* nonetheless displays a full set of unit markings – JG 54's well-known 'Green Heart', with III. *Gruppe's* shield superimposed, below the cockpit and 9. *Staffel's* 'Grinning Devil's Head' in miniature on the cowling. Having survived being wounded in 'Yellow 1' on 20 February 1944, Schilling eventually ended the war as *Kapitän* of 10./EJG 1. His total of 50 kills are all thought to have been scored on the eastern front.

## 32

### **Bf 109G-5 'Yellow 11' of Feldwebel Fritz Ungar, 9./JG 54, Ludwigslust, January 1944**

This high-altitude Bf 109G-5 flown by several of Schilling's pilots wears the same combination of unit badges as those displayed by their *Kapitän's* 'Yellow 1'. But it has a noticeably lighter overall finish, which makes III./JG 54's deep blue Defence of the Reich band stand out all the more. 'Yellow 11' was originally the mount of Feldwebel Ungar during the winter of 1943-44, after which it was flown by Feldwebel Hecker. It was finally lost whilst being piloted by Unteroffizier Gerhard Kroll, who was shot down and wounded over the Lüneburg Heath area on 8 April 1944.

## 33

### **Bf 109K-4 'White 1' of Hauptmann Menzel, Staffelkapitän 9./JG 77, Lohausen, December 1944**

Included primarily to illustrate JG 77's white-green Defence of the Reich bands (reportedly introduced, although not on all machines, specifically for Operation *Bodenplatte* – the New year's Day attack on Allied airfields), it was originally thought that 'White 1' depicted here was brought down during the 1 January 1945 attack while being flown by Leutnant Herbert Abendroth. Now known not to be the case, the aircraft's ultimate fate remains uncertain, as does the final score of Hauptmann Menzel, who remained *Kapitän* of 9. *Staffel* until the unit's eventual disbandment in the chaotic days of April 1945.

## 34

### **Bf 109K-4 'Yellow 10' of Leutnant Heinrich Hackler, Staffelkapitän 11./JG 77, Düsseldorf, December 1944**

There is no mystery surrounding the end of Menzel's fellow *Staffelkapitän* Heinrich Hackler, who *did* take part in



*Bodenplatte*, only to be shot down and killed over Holland by anti-aircraft fire – although not in the 'Yellow 10' shown here, but in 'Yellow 1'. At the time of his loss Leutnant Hackler was III./JG 77's most successful pilot with a score of 67 (including nine 'heavies' of the Fifteenth Air Force downed over Hungary and Rumania, but none over the Reich). Note the *Geschwader's* 'Herz-As' (Ace of Hearts) badge on the aircraft's cowling.

### 35

#### **Bf 109G-10 'Red 2' of Feldwebel Eberhard Gzik, 2./JG 300, Borkheide, September 1944**

Wearing JG 300's original brick-red Defence of the Reich band, this machine also sports a girl's name above the individual letter (a not uncommon practice among 2. *Staffel's*

pilots). Gzik was wounded on 28 September 1944 and 'Red 2' was lost in the last great battle of 14 January 1945 when piloted by Unteroffizier Thomas Tautscher (or Tsutscher?). Gzik himself survived the war, latterly flying the Me 262 with both *Kommando Stamp* and JG 7.

### 36

#### **Bf 109G-6 'White 6' of Unteroffizier Willi Reschke, 1./JG 302, Götzendorf, July 1944**

Willi Reschke was forced to belly-land his damaged 'White 6' on 29 August 1944 after claiming his 14th victory (all but one of them heavy bombers) with 1./JG 302. Shortly thereafter the *Staffel* was redesignated 9./JG 301 and converted to Focke-Wulfs Fw 190s, on which he claimed his remaining 13 kills and won the Knight's Cross.

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# INDEX

References to illustrations are shown in **bold**.  
Plates are shown with page and caption locators in brackets.

Adams, Capt Howard F 16  
aircraft plants raids 22, 31, 32, 55, 59, 61, 64, 71, 76, 80

Andresen, Oblt Lorenz 80

Bartels, Fw (later Ofw) Heinrich 71, 84

Beckham, Capt Vance 14

Beise, Hptm Günther 13, 21

Bendert, Olt Karl-Heinz 59, 68, 69

Benning, Ofw (later Ltn) Anton 78

Berlin raids 65-66, 66, 67, 68, 72

Beyer, Maj Franz 62, 67

Bitsch, Hptm Emil 64, 69

Bob, Hptm Hans-Ekkehard 23, 23

Boeing B-17 Flying Fortress 6, 11, 13, 54  
B-17F 4, 14, 15, 20, 22, 23, 24, 25, 31, 33, 38

Boeing YB-40 29

Boerngen, Hptm Ernst 74, 74

Brändle, Maj Kurt 8(40, 90), 53, 56, 56

Bremen raids 18, 22, 52-53, 57-58

Bristol Blenheim IV 7

Büscher, Uffz Werner 28

Carganico, Maj Horst 74

Christian, *Generalmajor* Eckhard 82-83

Christmann, Olt Herbert 22(44, 92), 63, 64

Consolidated B-24 Liberator 11, 13, 16, 17, 25

Dahl, Hptm (later Maj) Walther 33, 38, 49, 54, 61, 64

Demetz, Uffz Leo 17

Dickfeld, Hptm (later Maj) Adolf 22, 23, 25-26

Düllberg, Maj Ernst 69, 75

Eaker, Brig Gen Ira C 11, 12, 15

Eberle, Hptm Friedrich 2, 3(39, 90), 52

Einberger, Uffz Rudolf 30

Emden raids 15-16, 49-52, 58

Ewald, Maj Wolfgang 33, 68

Faber, Hptm Alfred 57

Falkensamer, Hptm Egon 25, 58

Fest, Uffz Wilhelm 'Jonny' 4, 31, 66

Fink, Hptm Günther 26-27, 27

Framm, Olt Rainer 57

Franzisket, Hptm (later Maj) Ludwig 32, 23(44, 92), 54, 55, 73, 74

Frese, Ltn Hans 69, 71

Frey, Olt Hugo 14, 29-30, 53, 57, 58, 59, 62

Fröhlich, Uffz Hasso 84

Führmann, Fw Erich 4

Galland, *General der Jagdflieger* Adolf 52, 56, 80, 81, 83, 84

Gerhardt, Ltn Dieter 18, 19

Gerhardt, Ofw Werner 11, 13

Gerlitz, Maj Erich 65, 69

Göring, Hermann 12, 20-21, 52, 55-56, 56, 61, 77, 80, 82

Götz, Maj Franz 'Altvater' 80

Graf, Maj (later Obstlt) Hermann 33, 34, 49, 58, 62, 67, 68, 69, 71

Gräf, Fw Kurt 49

Griener, Fw Albert 'Ali' 11

Grislawski, Olt Alfred 37, 38, 27(45, 93), 49, 82

Gross, Ofw Artur 78

Grünberg, Fahn-Ofw (later Ltn) Hans 75, 75

Grütz, Uffz Erwin 12

Gzik, Fw Eberhard 35(47, 94)

Hackl, Hptm Anton 'Toni' 50, 51, 52, 59, 62

Hackler, Ltn Heinrich 34(47, 94), 84

Hammer, Ltn Alfred 28(45, 93)

Hardt, Olt Friedrich 30

Hentschel, Oberst Karl 20, 82

Herhold, Uffz Ewald 23, 28

Herrmann, Maj Hajo 60

Hintzen, Olt Hermann 22, 21(44, 92)

Hinz, Uffz 38

Hitler, Adolf 6, 7, 10, 11, 52, 81, 82-83

Hoerschelmann, Ltn Jürgen 73

Hondt, Ltn Erich 22

Ihlefeld, Maj Herbert 33, 33

Ilk, Hptm Iro 78, 79

Kap-herr, Olt (later Hptm) Hermann *Freiherr* von 49, 71

Kehrle, Fw Josef 30

Keil, Uffz Karl 76

Kemethmüller, Ofw Heinz 37

Kettner, Obstlt Kurt 80

Kiel raids 24-25, 25, 28-29, 32, 58

Kientsch, Ltn (later Olt) Willy 24(44, 92), 48, 57-58, 59, 61, 61

Kirschner, Olt (later Hptm) Hans-Joachim 10(41, 91), 51, 52, 52

Klemm, Ofw Rudolf 27

Klöpper, Olt Heinrich 53, 57

Knoke, Ltn (later Hptm) Heinz 4, 16, 17, 17, 19, 19-21, 22, 24-25, 26, 26, 27, 30, 36, 37, 1(39, 90), 19(43, 92), 50, 51, 52, 62, 63, 65, 66, 67, 71-72

Koenig, Olt Hans-Heinrich 51

Köhler, Hptm Armin 84

Krupinski, Oblt Walter 76

Landt, Ltn Günther 'Micki' 30(46, 93)

Langer, Hptm (later Maj) Karl-Heinz 11(41, 91), 76, 76

Laube, Hptm Ernst 14(42, 91)

Leesmann, Olt (later Maj) Karl-Heinz 21, 27, 30, 31, 31

Lemke, Hptm Wilhelm 38, 12(41, 91), 49, 54, 57

Lennartz, Uffz Helmut 26

Litjen, Ofw Stefan 64

Loos, Olt Gerhard 67, 67

Losigkeit, Hptm Fritz 13

Lucas, Olt Werner 54

Luftwaffe 12

*Jasta* Helgoland (later 11./JG 11) 21-22, 28, 51, 63

JG 1 (later 'Oesau') 10, 12-13, 29, 72

I./JG 1 (later II./JG 11) 10, 11, 13, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18, 18, 19-20, 21

II./JG 1 (formerly I./JG 3) 12, 14

III./JG 1: 21, 27, 30, 31, 32, 37, 2, 3(39, 90), 52, 53, 57, 58, 81

IV./JG 1: 12, 12, 14

2./JG 1: 10, 11, 18, 1(39, 90)

3./JG 1: 10, 10, 16, 18

8./JG 1: 30, 4(39, 90), 5(40, 90)

*Stab*/JG 1: 8, 9

JG 2: 10, 13

JG 3 'Udet' 75

I./JG 3 (later II./JG 1) 12, 29, 31, 32, 37, 6(40, 90), 53, 61, 68-69, 71, 81, 83

II./JG 3: 8(40, 90), 48, 50, 51-52, 53, 54, 56, 62, 65, 72, 73, 75, 81, 82

III./JG 3: 33-34, 38, 49, 54, 55, 61, 64, 68, 69, 71, 75, 76, 81

IV./JG 3: 13(42, 91), 48, 62, 67, 68, 71, 72, 73

2./JG 3: 7(40, 90)

4./JG 3: 9(41, 91)

5./JG 3: 10(41, 91)

7./JG 3: 11(41, 91), 49

9./JG 3: 12(41, 91), 49



- Stab/JG 3: 49  
 III./JG 4: 81–82  
 IV./JG 4: **14**(42, 91), **85**  
 14./JG 4: **15**(42, 91)  
 I./JG 5: **16**(42, 91), 53, 64–65, 74  
 II./JG 5: 74–75, 79, 80  
 4./JG 5: **17**(43, 91–92)  
 JG 11: 35–36, **70**  
   II./JG 11 (formerly I./JG 1) 21, 22–23, 24, 25–26, 27, 28, 30, 31, 36, 37, **18**(43, 92), 50, 51, 52, 58, 59, 62, 63, 66, 71, 73, 76, 81  
   III./JG 11: 21, 29–30, 31, 32, 36, **50**, 51, 52, 59, 60, 62, 65, 66  
   5./JG 11: **4**, 31, 36, **19**, **20**(43, 92), 50  
   6./JG 11: 25, **21**(44, 92)  
   9./JG 11: **28**  
   11./JG 11 (formerly *Jasta* Helgoland) **22**(44, 92), 63  
 JG 26: 10, 11, 13  
   III./JG 26: 28, 30, 31, 32, 37, 38, 53  
 JG 27  
   I./JG 27: **18**, 19, 32, 34, **23**(44, 92), 54, 55, 56, **61**, 63–64, **70**, 72, 74, 75–76, 81, 82  
   II./JG 27: 48, 51–52, 54, 59, 61, 65, 68, 79  
   III./JG 27: 69, 70, 75, 81  
   IV./JG 27: **26**(45, 93), 69, 70, 75, 81, 82, 83  
   2./JG 27: 19, 21, 22, 23  
   3./JG 27: **70**  
   6./JG 27: **24**(44, 92)  
   9./JG 27: **25**(45, 92–93)  
 II./JG 51: 54, 55, 56  
 JG 53 'Pik-As'  
   II./JG 53: 55–56, 64, 81  
   III./JG 53: 79, 80, **85**  
   5./JG 53: **29**(46, 93)  
   6./JG 53: **28**(45, 93)  
   11./JG 53: **30**(46, 93)  
 III./JG 54: 21, 22, 23, 25, 26, 28, 29, 30, 31, 53, 57, 66–67  
 9./JG 54: 25, **31**, **32**(46, 93), **67**  
 I./JG 76: 81–82  
 JG 77  
   II./JG 77: 7, 8, 81  
   III./JG 77: **81**, 81  
   5./JG 77: **8**  
   9./JG 77: **33**(47, 93)  
   11./JG 77: **34**(47, 94)  
 JG 300: 60–61, 78  
   I./JG 300: 61, 78–79  
   III./JG 300: 60, 78–79, 84–85  
   IV./JG 300: 84–85  
   2./JG 300: **35**(47, 94)  
 JG 301: 60–61, 78  
   III./JG 301 (formerly I./JG 302) 80  
 JG 302: 60–61, 78  
   I./JG 302 (later III./JG 301) 61, 62, 74, 75, 78, 79, 80  
   II./JG 302: 72  
   1./JG 302: **36**(47, 94)  
 JGr 25: 33, **34**, 62  
 JGr 50: 33, **34**, 37, 38, 49, 54, 62  
   1./JGr 50: **27**(45, 93)  
 NJG 1: 16, 17  
 I./ZG 26: 7  
  
 MacRae, Flg Off W J, DFC **9**  
 Mader, Maj (later Hptm) Anton **21**, 62  
 Maltzahn, Olt Dankward *Freiherr* von 48  
 Meimberg, Hptm Julius **82**  
 Menz, Uffz Oskar 23  
 Menzel, Hptm **33**(47, 93)  
 Messerschmitt Bf 109 **10**, **18**, **19**, **30**, **49**, **50**, **85**  
   Bf 109E **13**  
   Bf 109F-4 **12**  
   Bf 109G 13, **18**, **61**, **68**, **70**  
   Bf 109G-1 13, 17, **1**(39, 90)  
   Bf 109G-4 **6**(40, 90)  
   Bf 109G-5 **34**, **16**(42, 91), **18**(43, 92), **32**(46, 93), **50**, **51**, **70**  
   Bf 109G-6 **26**, 26, **7**(40, 90), **11**(41, 91), **21**(44, 92), **58**, 79  
   'Black 1' **4**, **4**(39, 90), **10**(41, 91), **19**(43, 92)  
   'Black 2' **29**(46, 93)  
   'Black 5' **5**(40, 90)  
   'Black 9' **4**  
   'Black 10' **20**(43, 92)  
   'Black Double Chevron' **13**(42, 91), **23**(44, 92), **26**(45, 93)  
   'Double Chevron' **8**(40, 90)  
   'White 1' **17**(43, 91–92)  
   'White 6' **36**(47, 94)  
   'White 10' **9**(41, 91), **27**(45, 93)  
   'White 20' **3**(39, 90)  
   'White Double Chevron' **2**(39, 90)  
   'Yellow 1' **25**, **28**(45, 92–93), **31**(46, 93)  
   'Yellow 3' **24**(44, 92)  
   'Yellow 7' **12**(41, 91)  
   'Yellow 9' **67**  
   Bf 109G-10 **35**(47, 94)  
   Bf 109G-14 **14**, **15**(42, 91), **85**  
   Bf 109K **81**  
   Bf 109K-4 **30**(46, 93), **33**(47, 93), **34**(47, 94)  
   Bf 109T **22**, 22, **22**(44, 92), **64**  
 Meyer, Hptm Otto **26**(45, 93), 48, 69  
 Michalski, Hptm (later Maj) Gerhard **55**, 55, 56, 64  
 Mietusch, Hptm Klaus 37  
 Miksch, Fw Alfred 31, **5**(40, 90)  
 Mix, Maj (later Obstlt) Dr Erich 10, 20  
 Moritz, Hptm (later Maj) Wilhelm **13**(42, 91), 71, 72, 73  
 Müller, Maj Friedrich-Karl 'Tutti' 67, 68, 70, 73, **75**, 75  
 Munich raids 78, 79–80  
 Münster, Ltn Leopold 'Poldi' 57, 63, 65, **72**, 72  
  
 Niese, Fw 28  
 nightfighting tactics, '*Wilde Sau*' 60–61  
 North American P-51 Mustang 6–7, 58, 62, 63  
  
 Oesau, Oberst Walter 'Gulle' **58**, **72**, 72  
 oil installations raids 72–73, 75, 78–79, 80, 82, 84  
 Olejnik, Olt (later Hptm) Robert 31, 52  
 Operation '77' 10–11  
 Operation *Argument*/'Big Week' 63–65, 73  
 Operation *Bodenplatte* 84, 93  
 Operation *Gomorra*/'Blitz Week' 30–32  
 Oppermann, Ltn Gerhard **50**  
  
 Petzschler, Uffz Horst **7**(40, 90)  
 Post, Robert B 16  
 propaganda leaflet **85**  
  
 Quaet-Faslem, Hptm (later Maj) Klaus 29, 37, **6**(40, 90), 61–62  
  
 Rall, Maj Günther 71, 73, 76  
 Rammelt, Hptm Karl **55**, 55  
 Redlich, Maj Wolfgang 75–76, **76**  
 Regensburg raids 34, 35, 36, 63–64  
 Reinert, Ltn (later Olt) Ernst-Wilhelm 75, **76**, 84  
 Remmer, Hptm Hans 64  
 Rentsch, Uffz Wolfgang 54  
 Renzow, Ltn Hans-Werner **84**  
 Republic P-47 Thunderbolt 23–24, **24**, 32, 50, 63, **83**  
 Reschke, Uffz Willi **36**(47, 94), 79–80, **80**  
 Rödel, Obstlt Gustav 75  
 Rollwage, Ofw Herbert **29**(46, 93), 64, 74  
 Roosevelt, Franklin D 11  
 Royal Air Force, Bomber Command **7**, 7, 8, **9**, 9, 10–11, 83  
 Rübell, Olt Günther **55**  
  
 Ruhl, Ltn Franz **9**(41, 91), **53**, 53  
 Rupp, Ltn Friedrich 26–27  
 Ruppert, Hptm Kurt 28–29  
  
 Scheufele, Oblt Ernst **15**(42, 91)  
 Schilling, Olt Wilhelm **23**, **31**(46, 93)  
 Schleef, Ltn (later Olt) Hans 34, 49, 69  
 Schmidt, Ltn Winfried **8**  
 Schnell, Hptm Siegfried 'Wumm' 53, 67, **72**  
 Schramm, Olt Herbert 57  
 Schroer, Hptm Werner **48**, 48, 59, 65, 67  
 Schumacher, Obstlt Carl **8**, 8, 9, 12  
 Schütte, Ofw Gerhard 34  
 Schwaiger, Ltn Franz 34, 71  
 Schwanecke, Oblt Günther **17**(43, 91–92)  
 Schweinfurt raids **4**, 34–38, 53–54, 55  
 Sinner, Hptm Rudi 66–67  
 Sommer, Olt (later Hptm) Gerhard 31, 73  
 Specht, Hptm (later Maj) Günther **26**, 26, 27, 30, 31, **36**, 36, **18**(43, 92), **51**, 51, 52, 57, 58, **63**, 63, 65, 66, **70**, 84  
 Speer, Professor Albert 80  
 Staiger, Hptm Hermann 32, 53  
 Stamp, Hptm (later Maj) Gerhard **79**  
 Stutt, Uffz 28  
 Supermarine Spitfire VB 17, 23  
 Surau, Ofw Alfred **49**, 49  
 Süß, Ofw (later Ltn) Ernst **58**, 58  
  
 Tank, Kurt **63**  
 Tetzner, Oblt Hans 80  
 Thyben, Fw Gerd 62  
 Tichy, Ofw (later Ltn) Ekkehard **68**, 69  
  
 Ungar, Fw Fritz **32**(46, 93)  
 US Air War Plans Division 11–12  
 USAAF (VIII Bomber Command & Eighth Air Force entries not shown)  
   Bomb Division, 2nd 48, 79  
   Bomb Groups: 44th 16, 25; 91st **15**, 18, 20, 22; 92nd **4**, 25; 95th 28; 305th **4**, 14, 38; 306th 23; 379th 28; 381st **33**, 36, 37; 385th 31; 452nd **66**  
   Bomb Squadron, 401st 22  
   Bomb Wings, 1st & 4th (later 1st & 3rd Bomb Divisions) **4**, 35, 48  
   Bomber Command, XII 55, 56  
   Fifteenth Air Force **54**, 56, 57, 61, 63–64, 70, 72, 74, 75, 76, 78, 79  
   Fighter Command, VIII 17, 23, 60  
   Fighter Group, 404th **83**  
  
 Vickers Wellington **9**, 9  
  
 weapons 17, **51**  
   bombs, 250-kg **13**, **19**, 19–21, 24–25, 26, 31  
   rockets **4**, 31, 33, **35**, **36**, 36, **19**(43, 92)  
 Weik, Ltn Hans 67, 68, 72  
 Weissenberger, Hptm (later Obstlt) Theodor **16**(42, 91), **74**, 75  
 Wennekers, Fw Hans-Gerd **20**(43, 92), 50, 51, 52, 59, 63, 65, 66  
 Werfft, Ltn Dr Peter **25**(45, 92–93)  
 Werner, Uffz Otto 16  
 Wessling, Olt Otto 71  
 Wiener Neustadt raids 55, 56, 72, 75, 76  
 Wilcke, Obstlt Wolf-Dietrich '*Fürst*' **68**, 69, 70  
 Wilhelmshaven raids **6**, 6, **7**, 8–9, 14–17, 19–20, 27, 56, 57, 62, 65  
 Winkler, Uffz Max 18, 19  
 Wintergerst, Ltn Eugen 27, 32, 57  
 Wurzer, Hptm Heinrich **62**, 62, 72, 74, 75, 78, 80  
  
 Zick, Uffz (later Fw) Siegfried 11, 14–15, 30, 52, 57, 62  
 Zuzic, Ltn (later Olt) Herwig 27, **4**(39, 90), 57

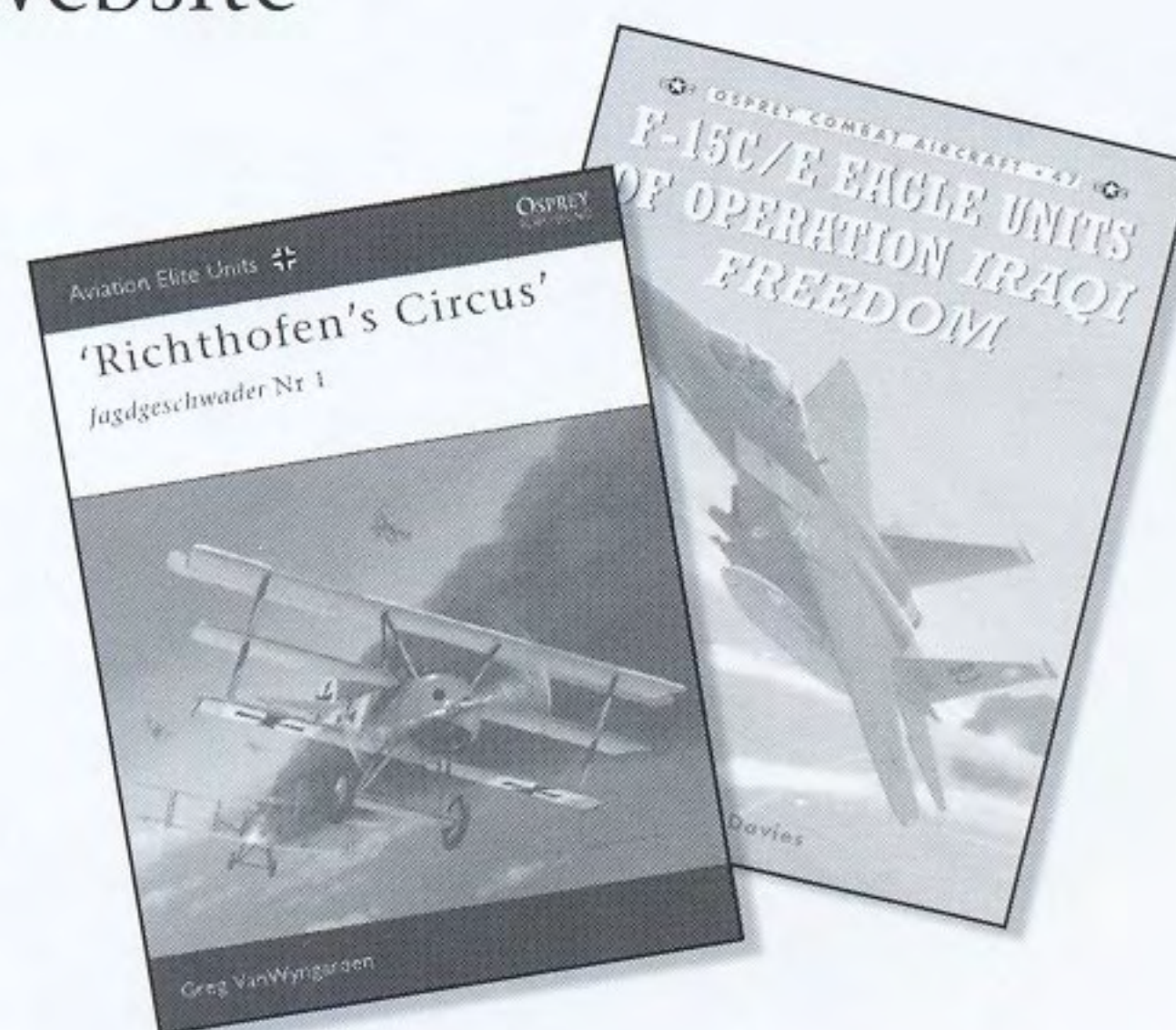


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## Bf 109 Defence of the Reich Aces



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